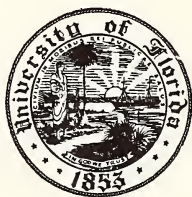


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# The State of Mind



THIRTY-TWO STORIES

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**Books by Mark Schorer**



**A HOUSE TOO OLD  
THE HERMIT PLACE  
WILLIAM BLAKE: THE POLITICS OF VISION  
THE STATE OF MIND**

# The State of Mind

THIRTY-TWO STORIES  
by MARK SCHORER

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
BOSTON 1947

*The Riverside Press Cambridge*





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The Riverside Press  
CAMBRIDGE • MASSACHUSETTS  
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



*These stories are affectionately dedicated to*  
**DOROTHY HILLYER**  
*who thought of collecting them.*





**'It was evening all afternoon.'**

**WALLACE STEVENS**





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## *In the Night*

THE BOY came out of the house and sat down on the lowest step of the porch. The dusk was purple and filled with many whispers — the trees above him, the grass at his feet, the house even, in the wind, all conspiring in stealthy voices to push harsh terror into his soul. But he sat quietly, leaning back on his elbows, unafraid, for the dusk was not the night, the pitchy blackness of the room under the eaves where he slept, that darkness into which he tumbled screaming from the inescapable fright of dreams, nor that other darkness in which he found himself when memory ceased, that first darkness, in which life was lost.

For in the end he always came to the place where there was nothing but an unformed world of darkness with nothing in it but the train whistling far away in the night somewhere, and the terror. And that was all that he could remember, or find, all that there was in five whole years of his life.

He was thirteen, and sometimes he would sit quietly in the cottage or in the middle of a field and count off his years, test his memory by a selection of events and by setting up each of these events as a year in his life. So now, on the steps of the porch, he was thinking, *when I was twelve . . . when I was eleven . . . when I was ten . . .*

He got up and ran across the field behind the cottage and started up an alley toward the railroad tracks, thinking, *when I was eight . . . when I was seven . . . but when did I*

*start going to watch The Chief at the bend every night after supper? What year was that? Eight? Seven? What year was that? When I was twelve . . .*

It was autumn, and in the blue twilight a mist clung to the village, a blur of fog around the street lights swaying in the wind, and in the air the fine smell of smoke of burning leaves and wood, the air clean suddenly, free of the dirty smoke of soft coal that had long ago, before he could remember, blackened every building that huddled near the tracks, that had withered up the leaves on the trees so that now they were only dead stalks, gaunt and ugly, not trees at all any more. He walked through the black shadow of the grain elevator and came to the fences of the stockyards. Through the palings he saw a bull standing with head lowered in the middle of a pen, and he saw the bull's soft eyes staring at him through the half-darkness, its head moving slowly, turning as he moved by, thinking, *when I was twelve — confirmation in the church because the minister came and said that every boy should be trained in the ways of God and all the people were dressed up and now I never go to church any more: but eleven, eleven, that was when Ella's cough got worse and she died and her face was yellow and thin and the house was full of a funny smell like medicine, that was the smell of death: and ten was when dad fell off a truck and broke his leg.*

He came to the end of the cinder path and the depot loomed before him. Through a window he saw the agent bathed in the glow of a green-shaded lamp suspended from the ceiling, heard the spasmodic click-click of the telegraph instrument, a sound that had always been a mystery to him; and walked on with the years beating a pulse in his brain, the years of his life, *twelve and eleven, twelve and eleven, and ten, when dad fell off a truck when he was drunk and broke his leg and didn't he swear at ma though when he had to stay in bed for a month as though she were the fault, as though she had pushed him off the truck and made him drink and get drunk*

*and got drunk and hit him and knocked him down, and as though she, as though ma, as though ma . . .*

He was out of the village then, walking swiftly along the tracks, stepping nimbly from tie to tie, his feet accustomed to the irregular spaces between them. He saw the pale arc of the new moon over the dark hills, and, to the south, a faint glow in the sky where the marshes were burning. All around him the rolling prairie stretched blue and vague, immense and mysterious, bounded by the hills and rolling beyond them where he could not see, where he had seldom been. The wind blew crisply, moaned with a faint insistence through the long grasses withering at the side of the tracks, and he walked faster, forgetting the prairie around him, faster with the pulse of the years in his brain, faster with *when I was nine I had the measles and there was a red sign on the door and I had to stay in the house for two weeks and Miss Welsh came and brought a basket of oranges and big grapes and bananas, but I never got any of them, and she called to me through the window and said I should hurry back and when I came back I wasn't in primary any more but in elementary; eight — that was when ma ran away one night when it was snowing and said she'd die before she came back and I cried and she was standing outside looking in all the time and then she came back in and didn't go anyway; and seven, seven . . .*

He came to the bend. On the cindered slope that rose above the double tracks as they swerved out of their course to make the bend, he found the pile of ties on which he was accustomed to sit, sat down, and waited. In the town a half-mile away, yellow lights in windows glowed faintly through the mist, and the grain elevator stood high, blacker than the night; but the scene swam before his eyes, dimmed, and was lost again in *seven, seven, what was that? oh, when I knocked the coffee pot over and there's a white place on my arm now where you can see how the coffee burned me; six — when I went to school for the first time and ma didn't go with me though all the*

*others had their mothers there with them and Miss Grandon was the teacher and she had long feet and once she pulled my ear until it bled and I had to cry; five — five, five . . . four . . . three . . .*

. . . and so he always came finally to the place where there was nothing but darkness in the room under the eaves and the wind blowing and the train's whistle in the night, a sound that made him afraid in the lonely dark, as if he were all alone in the house and as if there were no people in the world, and sometimes he called his mother and she came up and sat on the bed and hummed a song until he slept, and then he still seemed to hear in a dream the train whistling in the hills as it rushed through the black night.

He shoved his hands into his pockets because they were cold. The smell of autumn was in his nostrils, the pleasant, acrid smell of smoke, and he knew that winter was not far off. His throat began to ache, for the thought of winter's closeness saddened him, since winter meant staying at home every night, sitting close to the kitchen stove trying to keep warm by the flames of a bucket of coal he would have scoured the tracks a mile or more to find, meant trying to read a book when his throat was choked by fear and waiting. There would be no sound in the kitchen except the occasional shuffle of coals falling in the stove, but his mother would be working, patching a coat or a pair of pants that was nearly all patches already, and her grim silence would fill his ears with a more painful sound than any real sound he could imagine. Or she would be ironing, and the clatter of the irons on the stove when she changed them would be like a gift as it broke into the grim silence that clutched at him, like hands tightening on a throat to strangle it, like a weight bearing down and making him breathe hard with a kind of soft fear.

Then they'd hear cursing up the street or stumbling steps, and his mother's thin face would draw into sharper lines, her hands would tremble, her eyes would close quickly as she held

her breath for a second and leaned against the table. On the steps outside there would be a tremendous scraping of snow from heavy shoes, and then the door would crash open and his dad would lurch into the small room and fall heavily into the chair by the door. Snow would sprinkle onto the floor from his shoulders. He would sit sprawled in the chair, his legs flung out before him, his arms swinging loose by the legs of the chair, and his head down on his chest. A puffing sound would come from his purple lips every time he blew out his breath.

'My God, what a hellish night!' he'd say at last, or mumble, 'God, I'm a tired man!'

Then they'd have to get him upstairs to bed.

Once on such a night his mother put the iron down on the stove and said in a cold voice unlike her own, 'Now I'm through. Now I'm going.' Her face was white.

Dad's lips kept on blowing out a little with each puff. He did not raise his head. His hands were red with the cold and chapped, and in the silence that closed on his mother's words, the boy's eyes were caught by the glint of red hairs on his father's heavy hands. He did not lift his eyes. He watched the glint of the hairs on his father's hands and waited with a dead heart for the silence to end.

So he did not see his mother's face when she screamed. He heard only the high rasp of her voice, like a sharp knife slashing down a length of canvas. 'Do you hear? I'm through!'

Then she ran for her coat in the parlor. The boy flew after her, his heart going again, and in the darkness of the parlor he heard her heavy breathing, and then threw his arms around her waist and pressed his face against her. 'Ma, ma, oh ma, please . . .' This was all he could get out. He struggled with words but they were hampered by tears and by a picture somewhere in his mind of himself left alone in the house, and nothing came; and only when he felt her arms pushing him roughly to the floor and knew that she was escaping from the

room did he find words into which to crowd his terror, and then he screamed, 'Ma, don't go, ma, I'm here, ma, I'm here and I'll be alone and *ma* . . . ' The kitchen door slammed.

His face was pressed against the hard rough surface of the parlor rug. He lay there in the darkness and the tears ran across his face as his body shook in spasms. His throat was thick, hot and aching. On the floor, a chill draft drifted over his body so that he shivered with cold and terror at once. He wept, and he felt that the substance of his life would always be weeping on this dark floor.

When he suddenly heard his father's voice, he grew rigid and silent. And then he crouched up in the darkness. She hadn't gone, then! He hadn't let her go, then! She was still there!

'Get back, you, get back and take that coat off!' the boy heard.

'You devil, let me out of here! Let me out or I'll ——' Her voice was high and shrill in frenzy.

The boy got up from the floor. He came into the kitchen just as his father's fist drove down and smashed against his mother's cheek. She fell to her knees. 'Oh God, oh God, oh God,' he heard her say.

He saw his father. He stood guarding the door, stood unsteadily on widespread feet, short, heavy, red in the face, one arm still raised in the air. On his heavy features was an expression of dumb bewilderment, and there was a like bewilderment in the short arm that hung listlessly in mid-air, as if he did not know what to do with it now that it had struck. But then the boy was on his knees with his arms clasped around his mother's neck and shoulders, and he was whispering, urging, 'Come on upstairs, ma, come on, come on,' fearfully, gently, until the woman rose clumsily from her knees and, leaning heavily against the thin boy, went slowly up the stairs with him. In the kitchen stood the father with his arm still raised in the air.

For a long time his mother lay on the bed without saying anything, only now and then, 'Sometime,' and after a long silence, again, 'Sometime.' They clung to each other in the darkness, and the trembling of the one seemed to increase the trembling of the other.

The boy raised his eyes from the ground to the town on the prairie again, to the blinking lights of the village in the early night. He felt the autumn wind blow over his body, penetrate his clothing, and though he was young, he knew there in the deepening twilight that that word, that *sometime*, had hung over his life from its beginning like a fearful thing that would fall.

Then he heard the lonely whistle of the train as it crossed the bridge over the river, and he heard the faint thunder of its wheels. In a moment the sky was brighter over the hills, and in another moment he saw the great eye of the engine grow large, blinding, burning white as it split the darkness of the prairie night and bore down upon him. The monster engine drove toward him and by him, and in the glow of the engine's furnace, the boy saw the engineer wave to him with a friendly arm. The short coal car roared by, and then the baggage car, with its big door partly open, revealing in a flash trunks, mail bags, crates; two day coaches, with slumping figures of men and women inside, uncomfortably stretched out on green plush seats; pullmans, a long string of them, and inside, all kinds of people, people reading magazines and playing cards, people sleeping on pillows propped up into corners, and people with their faces pressed against the windows, looking out; and then the diner, with its tables and spotless tablecloths, its glasses and silver, shining, and the people eating; finally, the observation car, the brief fragment of radio music over the roar of the wheels, a large man bending over a desk, writing; and then the receding train, with the lighted sign at its end, *The Chief*, in red, glowing letters.

It was always over too soon!

Lost in wonder and speculation, the boy stared at the receding light of the train, sank into the depths of habitual dream so quickly that the train had almost come to a complete stop before he was aware that the pounding pulse was ebbing. Then he heard a long shrieking of brakes and the heavy rattling of jolted cars.

The train had stopped!

He jumped to his feet, scrambled down the cinder embankment to the tracks, and started for the depot at a run. The train had stopped, they'd flagged it! Someone from the town was going away, and he would see who it was, and see the people on the train more closely, all the people who were going away, he'd see . . .

But he hadn't half crossed the distance from the bend to the depot when he saw someone get hastily on the train, saw the porter jump on with his stool, heard a rough voice yell up to the engineer, and heard the train start up again, laboriously, slowly at first, but gaining power and pulse, gaining strength, speed, driving ahead, faster, faster, faster, with an ever-increasing click-click on the rails. Then he heard the whistle, hoarse and already distant, and he ran more slowly. For a while he trotted on, panting a little, but before he came to the depot his trot had dwindled to a disappointed walk. In the distance the sounds of the train grew fainter and even fainter, became an almost unaudible rhythm in the night, a pounding fainter, fainter . . . fainter, lost on a breath of wind, a nearly unheard beating then, more imaginary than real, and finally, at last . . . lost . . .

The sickle moon hung lower in the sky now, and the night was black. The boy walked slowly toward his home, and he thought of the people in the train, who they were and where they were going, what distant cities they would visit, what seas they would cross, what high mountains and deserts in what strange lands. He marveled that someone from the town was on the train, that *The Chief* had been flagged and

stopped for someone whom he must know, that now this remarkable person was moving with all those other people, the strangers, was traveling through the night on the rushing train, was going far away, perhaps far west, as far as the ocean, and farther, farther. . . . Who was it that had gone and where had he gone and what country would he discover . . . ?

He passed the stockyard fences and heard the heavy breath of the animal he had seen before, penned up for slaughter, but now he could not separate the bull's hulking form from the darkness. Through the deep shadows at the base of the grain elevator again, and across the tracks to the village street. As he walked on, his mind began again with habit to count off his years, began, *thirteen, twelve, eleven . . . now and confirmation and Ella died . . . ten, nine, eight, and seven . . . dad's leg and measles and ma was standing outside all the time looking in . . . and seven and six and five, six and five, and five.* And his habit brought him to the fear again, nothing but the fear in the darkness and the train's whistle to drive pangs of loneliness into his heart and throat . . . and the fear, where did it begin, on what night, in what darkness? Somewhere there was a lost beginning that he might sometime find. Somewhere there was a beginning for this, for everything, for *seven, six, and five, seven was when I spilled the coffee on my arm and six was when I went to school and ma didn't come along, and five, five . . . and five.* A beginning of him and of fear, and somewhere a beginning for his mother, a beginning of happiness and an end of that in the beginning of her suffering. She had said, 'Sometime . . .'

He stopped short. His mouth dropped open a little. His eyes stared out into the darkness but they did not see the shapes of houses and of trees nor even the street lights swaying in a line down the middle of the street. They looked blindly and his heart began to pound and his breath to rasp.

He started to run.

He ran fast, as if pursued by a thing in the darkness. Trees flew by, buildings and lights, the schoolhouse, the church, and the wind whistled in his ears as he ran, but he did not see or hear. Across a lawn he ran, and jumped a hedge, slid down a deep, broad ditch and scrambled up, crossed a road, darted up an alley to a short-cut behind a neighbor's house, saw the cottage, and a light. . . . *But God, but God, help, help!*

He stumbled on the cottage steps but was up again in a second, and hurled himself against the door. It flew in and crashed against the wall.

He stood in the door and screamed. 'Ma!' And again, shrilly, in terror, 'Ma! Ma!'

His mother stood suddenly in the parlor door. 'Child . . . ' she began.

He stared at her with wide, wild eyes, stumbled across the room, and crumpled into a heap on the floor. His face was pressed down against her feet. 'You're here yet, you're here yet,' he panted, and then poured out a stream of words inarticulate with sobs.



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## Obituary

SHE FOLDED her thin brown hands on the open Bible in her lap and for some minutes sat motionless on the old sofa with her unseeing eyes on the face of the minister. She was a little bird of an old woman with thin gray hair wispily drawn back over her ears and fastened in a tight, sparse knot at the back of her head, with narrow, sloping shoulders, with thin, infolding lips. She sat there with her knees drawn closely together and the black folds of her second-best dress falling demurely to the faded flowers in the rug. She was an ordinary old woman with nothing remarkable about her except possibly her eyes; and though they, like the eyes of most old women, were dim and sunken, there was something else about them — a sudden glazing and sightlessness which gave to her whole face an air of preoccupation and abstraction. At moments like this the world dropped away from before her and she found herself suddenly in another world years back, engrossed with complete forgetfulness of the present in some event long past or in some idea that had come to her suddenly and that completely absorbed her. So she sat now on the sofa.

The minister leaned toward her in his rocking chair. He rustled the sheets of note-paper in his hand in an effort to draw her mind back to the business on which he had come; but the old woman did not hear. One hand came up from the open Bible and vaguely fingered the gold brooch that she wore on the lace at her neck.

The minister coughed. Then quietly he asked, 'When was he born, Mrs. Rilner? And was it in America or in the old country?'

She heard, and her eyes saw him again. For a moment she looked startled, and she hesitated before she said, 'Ah, yes. Here, it's all written in here.' Her hands busied themselves with the pages of the Bible until she came to the blank sheets at the back reserved for family history. Her eyes wandered up and down over a page of faded writing, and presently she forgot again the minister's presence and his purpose. She turned a page slowly and read on. Once her lips parted in a brief smile and then closed again. And again the minister coughed slightly and rattled the sheets of paper.

At last she looked up inquiringly. Remembering his question, she said quickly, 'He was born on the seventeenth of June, 1855.'

The minister's pencil made a faint scratching sound on the paper as he wrote. He looked up. 'And where, please, Mrs. Rilner?'

'Here,' she said. 'His father and mother were settled here for two years before he was born.'

'And what was his father's full name?'

'Franz William Rilner.'

The pencil scratched. 'And his mother's?'

'Hilda Neuman.'

The minister wrote.

The old woman looked down at her hands and smiled. 'I can remember his mother,' she said suddenly. 'She had a little mole behind one ear, the right one, I think, and she crocheted. How beautifully she crocheted! She was famous for it all over the county. People would come for miles to have her do a little fancywork for them. For a wedding present she gave us a big bedspread. I hardly ever use it, only when I have company, because it's so fine, such beautiful, careful work. I've never seen another like it, never in my life.'

The minister waited for her to finish before he said, 'All right, now, Mrs. Rilner; this is what I've got: Franz Christian Rilner, son of Franz William and Hilda Neuman Rilner, was born in our city on the seventeenth of June, 1855. Now, did anything important happen before his confirmation?'

The old woman's eyes searched the page before her, and then looked up again, bewildered now. 'It only says here that when he was ten he was very sick with scarlet fever and when he was fourteen he made his first trip to Chicago. Then when he was sixteen he was confirmed.'

'All right,' the minister said, and spoke aloud as he wrote, 'Confirmed in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ at the age of sixteen.' He paused. 'Then what?'

She was not looking at the book now, nor at the minister, but far down the reaches of her memory, and she spoke quietly out of her preoccupation as if she were alone in the room, spoke slowly, deliberately, with a peculiar serenity. 'He was eighteen when I came to visit here at my Aunt Linda's, and I was a year younger. We met for the first time at a picnic — at Ferry Bluff. There were twenty of us at that picnic, and after the moon came up, Franz and I went rowing, and I remember he took me far up the river while he told me about his father's life in the army in Germany and how his mother made him leave it and how they came to America when this town was just a few houses and a store. We forgot about the picnic until we heard the others calling us, and I can remember yet how their voices echoed back and forth across those hills. They thought something had happened to us. That was the first time we met.'

Her voice stopped but the look in her eyes did not change until the minister asked abruptly, 'Were you married shortly after that?' and held his pencil poised to take down another date.

'No,' she said. 'Just a few weeks after that picnic, his father died, and Franz took over the business. I guess his

mother thought that he should keep his mind on that for a while, because I didn't see much of him any more that summer, and then in the fall I went home again. Once during that winter he wrote and asked if I would come to visit during the holidays, but something happened and I couldn't go, and so I didn't see him again until the next summer, and in that summer his mother died. On the day she was buried, right after the funeral, he came over to my Aunt Linda's house, and I can remember how white his face looked. We sat in the parlor and didn't say much, but all of a sudden he came across the room and knelt down in front of me and put his head in my lap. His shoulders shook so that I wanted to cry too, because I knew how he felt, but I didn't. I put my hand on his head and kept running it over his hair, not knowing what I was doing, I guess, but feeling so sorry for him that I couldn't help it. Then we were married late in August.'

The minister sighed briefly and asked, 'What year was that?'

She said, 'That was in 'Seventy-Four.'

He wrote, and then looked up at the old woman with less impatience in his face, as if he suddenly understood her loss. He spoke in a kindly voice. 'You had a long life together.'

She smiled faintly and said, 'Yes. Fifty-nine years. That's a long time.'

There was a pause before she went on. 'In that many years you get to know the other person as if he was yourself. You know everything about him, everything he likes and does, the food he loves and the food he can't abide, and the people, too. For all those years everything you do you do only after you've thought of him, after you've wondered if he wants it done that way or if he doesn't want it done at all, and then, after a while, it gets so that you don't have to stop to think about things any more because you know before you start whether he wants it or not, and finally you never even think of things that he wouldn't think of himself; it's almost

as if you'd stopped being yourself and had been changed into him.'

There was a long silence which the minister hesitated to break, and the woman's eyes clouded over again before she spoke suddenly out of her reverie. 'You know what he's going to do before he does it, and you know what he's going to say when you ask him a question, and you even know how every word is going to sound when he says them. Sometimes I've heard people say that after two people live together for a long time, they even get to look like each other, and I guess that's true, too.'

The minister glanced down at his notes, and he said, 'Well, we'd better get on, Mrs. Rilner.'

She looked down at the Bible and then up again. 'After his marriage there's nothing written in here,' she said. 'I guess I should have written in it when things happened, but I never thought of it.'

The minister waited, and suddenly the woman looked at him intently, with something like surprise in her face. 'What *did* happen after that?' she asked.

'Think a minute and you'll remember,' he said.

Her eyes searched the ceiling and the walls as if she sought there for some clue to remembrance, and at last she said, 'I guess nothing much ever did happen to us. We never had children. I can't think of anything now, can't remember a thing, except little things that you don't want — for that. Like the time a dog we had, a collie, got run over and we buried him in the garden under the grapevines, and a trip we took to the World's Fair in Saint Louis, and once when he sprained his ankle on those steep old stairs that go up to the attic, but nothing important. No, I guess nothing much ever happened to us.'

'What about his business?' the minister asked. 'When did he give that over?'

She calculated silently for a moment. 'Well, that must've

been in about nineteen-twelve, because some time along in there my Cousin Frieda came to live with us, and I know that then Franz was at home all day because those two used to play double solitaire together most of the time. Say nineteen-twelve, anyway, because it was some time in there and no one else will remember if I don't.'

The minister hesitated before he scratched the date on his paper. Then the woman said, 'And after that, I guess there was nothing. He was almost sixty then, and so was I, and my Cousin Frieda died and we went to Saint Louis with the body. After that neither of us ever was out of the county, and hardly ever out of town even. What we did in those twenty years, I don't know.' Her voice was suddenly small and forlorn.

The minister sounded harsh in the room when he said, 'Well, then that's all.' Under the last date he drew a line with deliberation and emphasis.

But as he spoke and drew the line, the old woman's face underwent a quick change, for her lips fell apart and her eyes widened in disbelief. She pushed her hand across her withered cheek and stumbled to her feet, letting the worn Bible fall with a heavy thud to the floor. She spoke slowly and quietly at first, in a voice that sounded afraid. 'No,' she said. 'No, that isn't all, that can't be! You can't read that that way!' Then her voice went suddenly shrill, and she cried, 'We've lived together for almost sixty years, and there've never been two happier people, never two people who had a better life, and now you want to read that scrap with nothing on it but four or five dates! No, no, there's more, there must be more, there's a whole life and you haven't got any of it!'

Her voice was cracked and old, and as she spoke, wringing her hands in misery before him, tears suddenly sprang to her eyes and rolled down over her wrinkled cheeks. She caught her breath, looked about her from side to side with a slow, bewildered movement of her head, and then fixed her eyes

on the minister in fright and questioning. She stood in the most familiar room of her own house and looked like one lost in a strange place.

The minister came to his feet and laid the paper and his pencil down on the table in the middle of the room, and then he slowly walked around the table to the old woman. He spoke softly, as one speaks to a child. 'Come, now, Mrs. Rilner, you quiet down. It's all right, you know, everything's all right. Please sit down now.'

She looked up at him with a peculiar, unrecognizing glance, and in her hands twisted her handkerchief around and around until it was a rag in her fingers.

'Come, Mrs. Rilner,' the minister coaxed, taking the handkerchief from her and awkwardly trying to wipe the tears from her face. But he had hardly begun when the sobs rose in her throat again and new tears came to her eyes and spilled across her face. She looked almost wildly at him then and started to move slowly away from him as if he frightened her. He watched her indecisively and without moving, tried to speak again, and fell silent when he saw that she was going to the large sliding doors of the parlor. She leaned heavily against the knobs and pushed the doors apart, and the faint medicinal odor in the room was charged with the heavier odor of roses and lilies from the room she had opened.

She stumbled to the coffin of her husband. 'Oh, Franz!' She seemed to wait for an answer. Then she leaned down and looked steadily and hard into the dead face. Her shoulders quivered with each breath she took, and her hands, resting on the edge of the coffin, trembled so that the roses and ferns in the wreath on the coffin trembled too.

The minister stood in the opened door and said, 'Come, now, Mrs. Rilner, please. You must be calm.'

She did not stir. There was a deep silence in the house and no movement. Still the old woman clung to the coffin, hung speechless over the dead body of her husband. The tears

dried on her cheeks and her heavy breathing ceased, but she did not move. It was as if she were hypnotized by the face of the dead man.

At last the minister walked to her side and put his arm around her thin shoulders. 'Please, Mrs. Rilner, come away now,' he said. She looked vaguely up into his face for a long moment and then allowed herself to be drawn away from the coffin, but her feet were lagging and her eyes, staring back at the coffin, reluctant to look away.

In the other room again, the minister closed the doors of the parlor. 'I'm going to stop and ask Mrs. Turner to come and stay with you now — for today and tonight, and she can help you when people start coming.'

The old woman's face was blank with dismay; she nodded dumbly and managed at last to say, 'Yes. Thank you.'

'I'll stop on my way home. She can come right over. It should only be a few minutes before she comes.'

'I'm all right,' the old woman said.

'Of course.'

'Don't tell her to come if she's busy. I'll be all right.'

'Of course,' he said again.

'Don't urge her.'

'No,' he said, 'and I'll stop in again tonight. There're a few other matters we must go over . . .'

She did not answer. She looked at the closed doors of the parlor.

The minister picked his hat up from the table. 'You sit down now and rest,' he said.

'Yes.'

'Well, good-bye, then. And God bless you.'

'Good-bye.'

She followed him to the door and looked after him as he went down the steps of the porch and out through the gate in the white fence. Then she turned and went back into the empty room. She sat down on the worn sofa again and bent

to pick up the fallen Bible. She turned to the pages of handwriting at the back of the book and stared long and at last unseeing at the record of her husband's early life.

Fifty-nine years. Fifty-nine years. Fifty-nine years. She could think nothing else. Only that, over and over, with an empty monotony . . . fifty-nine years . . . fifty-nine years . . . over and over in her brain. . . .

She forced herself to break the monotony of that rhythm. Deliberately, she thought of the minister as he had written on his note-paper, and deliberately of the fact that presently her neighbor would come at the minister's request to comfort her. But then, as if inevitably, she slipped back into the circle again, was thinking: Fifty-nine years, fifty-nine years . . .

Fifty-nine years she had lived with him, and in all those years nothing had happened to them, nothing had happened that was important enough to be recorded in his obituary. He was born . . . he was confirmed . . . he was married . . . he had a business . . . and he died . . .

And then there suddenly sprang before her clouded sight a vision of the minister in the church next day, standing over the coffin and reading from his notes that barren account of her husband's life: Franz Christian Rilner, son of Franz William and Hilda Neuman Rilner, born . . . confirmed in the faith . . . married to Anna Grant . . . prospered in his thrift and industry . . . retired . . . and spent his last twenty years in the rich enjoyment of his bounty . . . mourned by his devoted widow, Anna Rilner. . . .

She put the Bible on the floor and lay back on the sofa, and the tears trickled slowly from her closed lids over the sides of her face to the pillow under her head. There must be more, there must be more, she kept thinking, and pressed her thin hands together on her chest in an agony of loneliness.

There was nothing more; that was all.

Then thinking seemed to cease entirely, and she did not know how long it was before she had a sharp memory of

Franz on the morning of their wedding, when they had gone out into the fields together to pick her bridal bouquet. It was August, and they had walked into a field of high white daisies, and they had picked a huge armful before they sat down in the middle of the field and he explained to her how a flower was made.

She thought of another day when they had planted the first seeds in the garden they had started, and she saw him standing with her on a heap of gravel while they watched a house being built for them, and she remembered the day on which they had moved into the house and the first night that they had slept there.

And then their whole life together lay before her like a landscape that one views from a high hill, and she remembered with an acute joy all the unrecorded fragments of living that made that life. She remembered him well and she remembered him ill, saw herself watching anxiously by his bed by candle-light through many timeless nights, and saw them together in a surrey driving to a county fair, saw him raise his arm to let the whip fall lightly on the backs of the horses and saw him jump from the carriage and help her to the ground. She watched him eat across from her at a table worn smooth beyond polishing by years of use, watched him lay down his knife and fork and fill the bowl of his pipe, watched him strike a match to light the tobacco and saw the flare of it light up his face in the supper gloom.

She opened her eyes and looked at the ceiling, and she thought almost with amusement of the minister writing down the dates of Franz Rilner's life. The house was silent as death, but she felt in it the presence of her husband, and she knew that he would be present still after his body had been lowered into the earth. She had lived with him for fifty-nine years and she knew him more intimately than it is possible to know oneself, and that knowledge could never die. She chuckled to herself in an almost idle amusement for the

minister and his dates, for she knew that what the minister had written on his paper was not the life of Franz Rilner nor even the frame of his life, but the parts that could be recorded and of the least importance. For you cannot write in a history the story of a day when two people sat in the middle of a field of daisies and felt the first strength of love, nor of two people planting a garden, nor of two people building a house and living in it together through years of time.

The house was filled with a dead silence, but out of the silence innumerable tongues spoke to her, and lulled her into a profound peace such as she had never known. It was as difficult to tear herself out of it as it is to tear oneself from the deepest kind of sleep.

But she got up from the sofa at last and came to her feet. She stood still for a moment and looked about the room she knew so well, and she saw in each object, in table and chairs and pictures and faded rug, some signal of her peace. Then she remembered that Mrs. Turner was coming to comfort her, and she smiled at that, and made her way slowly to the parlor doors to look upon the face of the dead man there once more before the woman came to break in upon her deep content.

And it was then, when she looked at him again, that everything collapsed once more. He was dead, he was dust, he was nothing. This time it was not sorrow that she felt, and she did not weep. Her old cheeks flushed slightly, and her hands trembled in rage. It was perhaps the last passion that she was to feel, the passion against life itself. He was dead, he was dust, he was nothing. Memory was the feeble trick of the mind to deceive itself, to create the mirage of permanence. But memory, like everything else, died too. She was an old woman, and she had nothing, nothing, not even now the fraudulent illusion of happiness, and to that knowledge her angry spirit said amen.

She went shakingly out of the room, closed the doors, sat down again on the sofa, and stared out coldly at the accumulated vanities of her lifetime.



### 3

#### *Long in Populous City Pent*

IT IS CURIOUS HOW, over many years, the memory of a situation which was once wrapped in mystery can linger in the mind long out of childhood, and finally somewhere in the years, one never knows at exactly what point, become meaningful, grow, as it were, into meaning; yet how, once it has clarified itself in the mind, one still remembers it as one first perceived it, forgetting the meaning and neglecting the judgment which meaning implies. So it is with the memory of these people, at any rate — The Strangers, as I still think of them. There is a mystery about them still, and so it is perhaps not really curious that even though their remembered gestures and the remembered fragments of their broken words have now for a long time come together into a meaningful picture, I remember them still as they were to me then and do not think much of the situation as I now know it to have been. I return to my childhood to remember them, to see them completely again, as real human beings (for they are rather like abstractions when I think of them from the point of view of the present, are not very living), the way I must have seen them then, as beings who, if without history or identity, yet trailed in their wake many days in which I saw them act and live and sometimes heard them talk, days which, I thought, taught me to know them and let me love them.

They came to Green Glade when I, who was then ten years old, was visiting my Aunt Selina there. She had lived for

many years just across the street from the little house of an old lady named Hannah Wade, a widow who died during the winter before my last vacation in the town. Mrs. Wade's cottage was on the river bank, the front facing the street and my aunt's house, and the back looking out over the river and across to the hills on the other side. There were two rooms and a small kitchen on the first floor of the cottage and a porch at the back, and upstairs a low sleeping room under the eaves. When Mrs. Wade died, my aunt bought the property, thinking that she would have the building torn down sometime and make a little park for herself on the river bank, with shrubs and flowers and perhaps a rock garden. In the spring, however, she decided to abandon this project for a while, and, hoping to rent the place for the summer, tacked a For Rent sign on the trunk of a maple tree that stood in front of the cottage.

Then one day the first two of these Strangers appeared.

I was sitting on the porch when they came up the street, but when I saw them stop and look at my aunt's sign and at the cottage, and then cross the street and peer in through the windows, I called my aunt, and she came out and stood with me on the porch. In a little while they came back across the street and walked up to the porch.

'You want to rent that cottage?' the young man asked. He scowled as he spoke, his dark face sullen, as if he were vexed about something. The young woman meantime said nothing, merely stood by expectant.

My aunt looked at them closely. 'What's your business?' she asked at last.

'I'm a writer,' the man said. 'We're looking for a quiet place where I can work for a few months.'

My aunt eyed them suspiciously. She had had no experience with writers, but she had her ideas about them. 'A writer?' she asked, as if she doubted his word. 'Well, what do you write?'

He frowned at her and was silent, but the young woman stepped forward, her face lighting up as she smiled, and she said, 'Oh, he writes stories, and sometimes poems. . . . Really, we're quite reliable!'

'What's the name?'

The man spoke. 'Shaw,' he said.

My aunt paused; then, 'Mr. and Mrs.?'

Again the man did not reply; and the woman said abruptly, 'Of course!'

'Well, how long would you want the place?'

'Only for the summer — unless we like it very much.' This from the woman again.

My aunt folded her hands on her stomach. She wagged her head. 'I see, I see,' she said. 'Well, you look like respectable young people. I'll get the keys and you can go over and see the place.'

While my aunt was in the house, they talked together in low voices. 'Do you think it's large enough?' the man asked; and she, 'Oh, yes!' 'Will you like it?' he asked then, his voice tender. She looked beyond the cottage, to the blue river, and beyond that to the hills where they sloped up from golden sand bars on the farther shore. 'Like it, Dave? It's perfect! Here anything — here anything — oh, don't you think that here you could do anything you set out to do? Don't you, Dave?'

He looked at her gently. 'Yes, Gerry. I do, I really do.'

Then they both stood looking at the hills across the river, at the full slopes and the rounded tops of the hills, and at the fringe of dark trees far beyond, a ridge of dark blue against the sun-washed summer sky.

Finally they seemed to remember that I was there and the woman smiled at me. Her face was happy. She said, 'Do you live here?'

'No,' I said, embarrassed. But she did not notice my confusion, nor, I think, did she hear my answer. She seemed removed from the scene by her own happiness.

When my Aunt Selina came out again, she led the way across the dusty road. The Strangers liked the cottage, and the location on the river perhaps more than the cottage, and when my aunt told them that the rent was only ten dollars a month and that they could come over and look through her garret for enough old furniture to make the place livable, they agreed immediately to rent it for the summer.

In my aunt's garret they found two large tables and a big bedstead and mattress and a couch and some chairs. For the rest of that day they were constantly going back and forth from the cottage to my aunt's house, tramping up the stairs to the attic and then down again, always bringing some piece of furniture out and across the road to the cottage. Next day their own belongings arrived — trunks, typewriter, a phonograph and records, a case of books. And on the afternoon of the second day they were already settled, and the busy noise of the man's typewriter, an uncommon sound in Green Glade, broke the still somnolence of the summer afternoon with an incessant clicking.

Something about them fascinated me. The man, in spite of moments of tenderness in which his face was softened by a gentle sadness, was gruff most of the time, glowering, darkly resentful, and brooding. He had light brown hair clipped short and gray eyes and a jaw that protruded, that made his lower lip jut out a fraction beyond his upper. His hands were large, corded, and hairy, and he moved with the hulking heaviness of big wrestlers. The woman was large, too — as tall as he, with a soft heaviness about her body, a deep bosom, and a plain, unpainted face over which expression moved as swiftly as wind rippling water. She was the first woman I had ever seen with hair cut short, and it was strange to look at her with her straight dark hair falling loose and short about her face. She wore simple dresses, usually white, and low shoes which perhaps made her feet look larger than they really were, and there was a slight lope in her walk. Her

face was kind and when she looked at you her large dark eyes always seemed soft with pity, as if there were nothing she could not understand and nothing which she did not love.

Still, there was nothing really unusual about them, except that they were from the city, so I do not know what it was that attracted me so, what strange aura there was about them, as of people from a remote, mysterious world which I had never known. They were friendly and as casual as friends, and yet I lived in awe of them. I would loiter about their door for hours on end waiting for an invitation to come in, and in the early hours of the evening, before my aunt insisted that my bedtime was past, I would hide behind the maple tree and peer over the sill of the cottage. I don't know what I expected to see or if I expected to see anything. I only know that there was something about them that was compelling, and something in their lives which eluded me.

Late one afternoon soon after they had arrived, the woman, Gerry, called me in from the street. The room in which the man worked had been transformed by my Aunt Selina's cast-off furniture and their own gift for making it look attractive. It was sparsely furnished, a little bare, so that, with the walls which they had whitewashed, it seemed very cool. The worn pine floor was scrubbed clean. The few pictures on the white walls were bright, and a deep blue cloth with white figures on it hung down from the ceiling to the man's work-table. A low bookcase stood behind my aunt's old sofa, covered now with a brown and blue shawl, and near it stood the phonograph and a case of records. The windows were hung with thin curtains of some brown stuff which turned to gleaming bronze in the streaming light of the late sun.

Near the windows which looked out over the river stood an easel with a half-finished canvas on it, and a table beside it on which were scattered a box of paints, daubed cloths, brushes, little jars and pots. I stared at it. 'Who paints?' I asked.

'I do,' said the woman. 'Not very well, do you think?'

I stared at the picture. 'Is that of the hills?'

She laughed. 'You recognize them!'

As I looked long at the picture, the familiar shapes began to emerge more clearly. 'There's Roundtop, isn't it?'

She laughed again. 'Yes.'

'But they're not that color,' I said. 'They're green! Yours are purple.'

She looked through the open door, across the river, to the hills. Then she said, 'Sometimes they look purple to me. Wait a little — until the sun sinks lower. Perhaps you'll see then.'

'Have you got any others?'

'Indeed,' she said. 'Do you want to see them?'

'Sure,' I said.

She walked across the room to the bookcase and took a large portfolio from behind it. This she laid on the floor before the sofa. I knelt on the floor and looked at the pictures, and as I turned them over, one after the other, she stood by the door looking out over the river humming to herself. Then suddenly I was aware that she was singing, in a low voice, very sweetly, German words, and singing as if to herself, as if alone and very happy:

'Kennst du das Land wo die Citronen blühn,  
Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühn?  
Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht,  
Die Myrte still, und hoch der Lorbeer steht —  
Kennst du es wohl?

Dahin! Dahin

Möcht' ich mit Dir, o mein Geliebter, ziehn!'

She stopped abruptly and turned to me. Her eyes looked very large and dark and she looked at me for a long time. Neither of us spoke, but we exchanged something with our glances. I felt that I wanted to cry, and I think it was because she had seemed so happy while she sang and that I felt

suddenly that she had not known happiness long before.

'You look at the pictures,' she said, smiling slowly.

'Yes'm.'

I looked at some more of them. Most of them were pictures of tall buildings, of streets crowded with people, of messy city interiors, very unlike the room I was in, of crowded parks and beaches. And in all of them the faces of people were blurs, and all alike, not one different from any other. Sometimes I came across a portrait, but in these too there was something blurred about the faces, and they were mostly of very old men with faces that seemed half-decayed, or of people who looked sick, white or gray or green in their faces, or of women with twisted smiles and large dark spots for eyes. Until suddenly I came to a picture of two young men, and I saw that one of them was Mr. Shaw. The other was a pale man, with a face like a boy's, with black hair that fell across his forehead on one side, and a red mouth in a white face. His face looked empty. Mr. Shaw was scowling, and looked sad.

'That's Mr. Shaw,' I said.

She looked up quickly from a book. 'Oh, that?' she said. 'Yes.'

'Who's the other?' I asked.

'A friend of ours,' she said. 'Name's Nickie.'

Just then Mr. Shaw came in from the street. He had been walking and looked warm. When he saw me he frowned, but when he saw the picture I was looking at, he turned to Gerry quickly with a sharp look of anger. 'Why are you showing him that?' he asked, as if she had selected that single picture to show me, and as if it were very strange that she should have.

She looked at him without answering at first. Then she said, 'I'm sorry, Dave. I'd forgotten it was there. And what does it matter?'

'Burn it, Gerry. Or send it to Nickie.' He spoke seriously, and at last she said, 'All right,' and to me, 'That's all

for now. Come look at the hills and see the purple.' She closed the folio and put it behind the bookcase again.

Dave Shaw lay down on the sofa and lit a cigarette. 'What country!' he said.

'Did you have a good walk?'

'Lord!' was all he said. He seemed to have forgotten about the picture.

'Here!' the woman said suddenly, handing me her box of paints. 'You take these. I'll bring the easel. We'll go out on the porch.'

On the porch she pointed a brush toward the hills. 'Do you see now? Isn't that purple?'

I looked hard at the hills. 'No,' I said. 'That's dark green. Or maybe blue.'

She laughed again, and then she began to paint, humming the German song as her brushes moved quickly over the canvas. I looked at the hills again, and then back to the picture. Her picture of the hills made them look rounder than they were, more flowing, more like great rounded waves of water. But when I looked back at them again I thought that they did look like that, and then I even thought that they were purple after all.

'They are purple!'

'Yes,' she answered, never stopping. 'Aren't they?'

And then I knew suddenly what the hills meant to her, why it was that she saw them so differently from the way I had seen them every summer of my life. In her picture there was a great freedom, and something rich beyond describing in the purple color of the hills and the blue sky and the fringe of blue river and gold sand at the bottom. I saw what the hills meant to her, and then I saw the hills that way myself. There was a vast freedom of movement in the flow of each round hill into the spacious, sweeping line of the whole range. And they were purple, rich and strong.

But suddenly she threw down her brush. 'No use,' she

said. 'I can't get it. I've painted sick faces too long, I guess. And tall buildings.'

'Nonsense,' Dave Shaw said from the door behind us. 'You've got it!'

He came out on the porch and flicked his cigarette away onto the beach below. He looked at Gerry with a warm smile. Now his face had no trace of the dark resentment which I had seen there so often. Now there was only warm love for her. She looked up at him with the same expression, and neither remembered me. 'I've got it too, dear. I know I have,' Dave said.

After that I was with them often. I would sit with them on the porch in the evening, watching the moon come up from behind the hills, and listening to the victrola inside. We would sit out there silently, caught in the spell of the strange, unmelodic music and the landscape, the sweet summer night and the gleam of the silver river, the song of a night bird far away in the marshes lifting itself now and then above the sounds that came from the victrola. Sometimes one of the two would begin humming to the music, carrying a theme for a moment or two on his breath and then falling silent again, or Dave would whistle softly sometimes when there was a melody in the music. There were few words. I began to feel that I was one of them, that, while they were still strange and mysterious, they were not really strangers any more. I was happy with them, simply sitting there, not thinking much, just listening, just being happy with them.

They were happy. As the days passed, I began to see that at first they had not been, that then there had been something strange even between themselves. But no more. Dave Shaw had almost forgotten how to scowl, and as he sat before his typewriter, pounding it fiercely, as if his hands and fingers feared that they would not get everything out on the paper before it was gone from him forever — as he sat there

his face was tense and grave, but never sad. And he would stop abruptly and sink back in his chair, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, and turn his head sharply to grin at Gerry wherever she might be in the room. She would smile back at him quickly, understanding his grin, and I would grin to myself, understanding too, as I did, that some important thing had grown between them and that I was sharing it. Or he would suddenly stop and turn to her and exclaim, with a kind of hard gratitude in his voice, 'I never thought I could do it. What's happened? It's easy!'

He would jump up from his chair and pace the narrow room in his delight. 'I never could do this before! I can do it now! There's something in me that's never going to die!' Then he'd grin again, embarrassed, and perhaps he'd come over to where I was sitting and throw me on the floor and wrestle with me with a crazy joy and energy.

Gerry would look away from him, out of the window or at the floor, and she'd say something that didn't seem quite to the point. 'Remember, Dave, when one was young, in school one was made to write essays on the advantages of city life as opposed to country life, or vice versa? Or debate the question? Remember?'

'Ha!' he'd cry. 'Don't lay it all to the landscape!'

She would go on in a very serious voice with remarks that I did not always understand, like, 'But it really is in the landscape. There's a deep moral difference between living in the country and the city, a profound difference, really, I think. In the country the personality has a chance to survive, to achieve its form. In the city it is only confused — tortured, wracked, deformed. The whole difference really *is* in the landscape.'

He would watch her with a look that showed he did not hear her, and when she finished, he'd say, 'You're so lovely when you talk that way. Why are you so shy? How could the city leave you that?'

Then she would feel embarrassed and turn to me. 'Aren't we silly? Come on now, tell us what you really think! Aren't we?'

I'd grin foolishly and mutter something, but want very much to say, 'No! Go on talking, please talk some more!' They were wonderful together. I loved to be with them. I never wanted them to go.

Only once did that wonder that had grown between them seem to falter and pale — that is, before Nickie came. They had asked me to come and have supper with them on the river bank one evening. Dave had built a fire on the sand behind the cottage. The food was laid out, paper plates, forks with wooden handles, some cups, and a big red and white checked tablecloth. We were sitting by the fire, waiting for it to die down before the grill for the steak was put over it. Dave and Gerry sat smoking and drinking red wine, and I, as usual, sat and was happy with them. We watched the river flowing by, and we listened to the frogs croaking in the marsh, and the locusts making their strange hot noise in the trees along the shore. Sometimes a fish jumped in the water with a heavy splash, or a solitary bird would break out in a clear, brief song. No one spoke and we were all happy.

Then suddenly Gerry said, 'You forgot about the mail!'

'Good Lord!' Dave cried and jumped to his feet. 'To-day's rejection! I'll be back in five minutes.' He started up for the cottage, and in a few minutes we heard his quick steps on the sidewalk as he went toward the post office.

When he came back his steps sounded slower in the quiet evening, and he came down to the beach from the cottage as if he had lost interest in our picnic.

'What's wrong?' Gerry asked.

He smiled weakly. 'Here's a present for you,' he said.

She took a quick glance at the letter he gave her and screamed with delight. 'Oh, darling, how perfectly elegant! They think it's great!'

I knew what they meant. Dave had sold a story. But he didn't seem to care much. He was putting the grill on the fire, his face turned away from us.

Gerry threw herself back on the sand. She held the letter against her face and laughed with pleasure, then sat up abruptly and looked at Dave. 'Darling, aren't you happy? Aren't you *pleased*?'

He looked at her. 'Sure. But there was another letter — not so good.' His voice was grave.

'What?'

He looked at her without answering for a moment, and when he did, he flung his answer at her. 'Nickie's coming.'

Gerry looked quickly away from him. She did not speak. She looked at her hands in her lap, clutching the letter. She began to smooth it out on her thigh. Finally she looked at Dave again. 'Wire him,' she said. 'Tell him we've no room.'

He shook his head. 'He wrote the letter just before he took the train. He's on his way. It's the way he'd do it.' He stood up and looked at the sky. I could see him tremble. His hands were shaking. Dave, who was large and seemed so strong, was frightened. He cried out angrily, 'What's he coming for? Why doesn't he let us alone?'

All of Gerry's quietness returned. She laughed. 'Let him come, Dave. That's the way it should be. It's in the logic. So let him come. Something in us now he can never touch.'

Then she went quickly to him and put her arms around his neck. She kissed him. His arms went around her waist, and he held her close. They had forgotten me again. When they separated, they laughed uneasily; some strain had come between them again. But then they noticed that the fire had almost died, and in the rush to get wood on it quickly to keep it going, they seemed to forget that anything at all had happened. But that evening we were not so happy together, not so content to sit quietly together. They kept trying to talk.

So Nickie arrived. I came to the cottage next day and saw him. The victrola was playing something, something that did not belong to Gerry and Dave.

Saint Lou-ee wo-man-n-n  
With your di-i-i-mond rings . . .

it screamed into the street. I came into the cottage and saw Dave and Gerry sitting on the sofa. In the middle of the room was Nickie. He was dancing. His arms were held out, and he was snapping his fingers. He moved his feet with a slow, dragging motion, and he twisted and writhed. His hair had fallen across his forehead on one side, and his mouth was drawn into a kind of leer. His eyes were closed. I stood and watched until the record was finished and Nickie stopped dancing. 'Isn't it good?' he cried. 'Isn't it?' Then he saw me. I stared at him.

'This is Nickie,' Gerry said.

We said hello to each other and then no one talked. Nickie stood by the door, looking out into the street. The summer afternoon was heavy with dust and all the town seemed to sleep in the heat. Shades were drawn and doors closed against the sun. Nothing moved. Nickie laughed. 'Well, you found quiet!'

Gerry and Dave looked at him without answering.

'But you *like* it?'

'Yes, we like it,' Dave said.

Again there was a heavy silence. Then Nickie said, 'Look, you don't *mind* my coming, do you? If I'd thought ——'

Gerry stood up. 'Don't be silly. It's grand that you could come. You'll like it too.'

'Well, good,' he said. 'I thought for a moment that maybe I wasn't wanted. You're as solemn as owls. After all, we're friends, aren't we?'

Dave stood up and went out on the porch. He leaned against the railing and smoked. Then Nickie went out too.

He looked a lot younger than Dave, and he was much slimmer and more agile. He moved across the room lightly, with a slight sway of his shoulders and narrow hips, with an odd grace. Gerry and I stayed inside and looked out at them. Nickie was talking, waving his hands, and suddenly Dave smiled, as if he didn't want to, and yet couldn't help it because what Nickie said was so amusing. Gerry turned away. 'I'm going for a walk,' she said, and went out into the street without speaking again to Dave or to Nickie. Then I went out on the porch. They were sitting on the top step. Dave was telling Nickie about a story he was writing. Nickie was quiet, listening, his eyes soft and dark, watching Dave's face as he explained his story.

'It sounds good, Davie! Very good!' Nickie said at last, and Dave asked quietly, 'You think it does, Nickie?'

'Yes, good, good!'

I wondered why he called him Davie. Gerry never did. It didn't suit him, either. But Dave didn't seem to mind. He stood up and said, 'I feel like working,' and went in.

Nickie followed him, and I went in, too. Dave sat down at his table and began to pound the typewriter. Nickie watched him. Once Dave stopped long enough to look sideways at Nickie the way he always did at Gerry. A brief smile flickered on his lips, and Nickie smiled back at him. But sadly.

'What's your last name?' I asked him.

He looked at me and shook his head. 'I never had one,' he said.

'Aw, you've got a last name. Everybody's got a last name.'

His voice went very sad. 'No,' he said, 'I never had a last name.'

I laughed. 'Where do you live?'

He looked at Dave, who had stopped writing and was watching us. 'I haven't any home, either.'

'Well, where were you born, you had to be born some place, didn't you?'

'I don't know where I was born.'

'Aw . . .'

'No, really!'

'Is your name Shaw?'

He grinned at Dave. Then he asked, 'What do you think?'

'Are you Dave's brother?'

He laughed and looked at Dave again. 'Yes,' he said at last. 'We're brothers.'

'You aren't either.'

'Yes, we are.'

'You don't look alike.'

'Brothers sometimes don't.'

I thought about that. Maybe they *were* brothers; but I didn't think so. They weren't acting like brothers now, for suddenly Dave cried angrily, 'Don't be a God-damned fool!' and turned back to his machine; but he didn't write again.

Nickie raised his eyebrows. 'Huffy, Davie?' he asked.

'Hell!' Dave cried, and sat staring angrily at Nickie. They were looking at each other with something like hatred in their eyes and I felt in that moment a terrible menace between them, a bitter threat such as I have never felt between two people. Then abruptly Dave said, 'Christ!' and stalked out of the room. He went down to the beach and sat on the sand.

Nickie said, 'Don't mind us!' to me, and I said, 'No,' and pretended to read, but I did not read. I understood nothing of what had happened, but I had seen the anguished fury that leaped from Dave's eyes.

Soon after that Gerry came back. She came by way of the shore and stopped where Dave was sitting and then the two came up together. When they came in, they smiled and said hello to Nickie and me quite gaily, and everything seemed cheery again. So I asked at once, 'Gerry, are Dave and Nickie brothers?'

She looked from one to the other, then to me. 'Why?'

'Nickie said they were!'

'Nickie's a fool!' Dave cried.

'Are they, Gerry?'

She looked at each of them again, and then at Dave until he looked away from her, at the floor. She put her hand to her hair and smoothed it where the wind had blown it out of place. At last she said, 'I don't know. I really don't know.'

Then Dave said to me, very frankly, 'Of course we're not brothers. He was kidding you. His name's Gray.'

'Oh,' I said. I felt that I was to blame for the trouble, and there was trouble, for once more the air was thick with a strain between all of them, and I felt that I had deliberately put myself out of that circle of friendship into which I had so easily come. Each of them seemed ashamed, and each looked away from the others' eyes.

That was only one thing. After Nickie came, nothing was the same again. Dave and Gerry would let hours and finally days pass without any of that talk between them that I had loved. Sometimes, at first, after a long embarrassed period of silence and strain, they would seem to seize upon each other with frantic desperation, and then they would deliberately go away from the cottage alone for a long time, and when they came back there was once more that warmth in their glances that I had seen grow. But back in the cottage, where Nickie was, something always happened again.

And between Nickie and Dave there was something like that too. Sometimes Dave would be very pleasant to Nickie, would read his stories to him and wait for his response with eager attention, and would talk to him a long time after in a low voice. But at other times I would see in his eyes the bitter, menacing fury, when he seemed to look upon Nickie as his deadliest enemy, his destroyer. And always there was the dark resentment in his eyes, turned not only at Nickie but in upon himself.

It was all very strange, and none of us were happy any

more. There were no more of those evenings under the stars and the moon, when we sat listening to the powerful, unmelodic music from the victrola. Sometimes Nickie would play one or another of his songs, but neither Gerry nor Dave played their music any more. Nickie was to blame for that, as he was for everything. But I did not know how he was to blame. And I liked him, too, almost as much as I liked the others, and I could not see why everybody was not as happy as ever.

One day when Gerry and I came back from a long tramp in the hills, we walked into the cottage to find Dave on the sofa. Nickie was standing behind him. He looked as though he had been talking to Dave for a long time. His hands were on Dave's shoulders, which were shaking slightly as, soundlessly, he wept. He jumped to his feet when we came in, and Nickie stepped back. Dave's face was torn with grief. He said, 'It's over, Gerry. I'm sorry.'

She looked at him, and then, with white rage, at Nickie. She turned to me quickly and said, 'Leave us now. Hurry! Go away!'

I went out as quickly as I could, but on the sidewalk I heard Nickie, his voice protesting, 'Don't look like that, Gerry. After all, it's a fair game. You always realized that.'

Then I heard Gerry cry aloud in a voice I had never heard before, 'Oh, you selfish little beast! You little beast!'

I ran toward Aunt's house. I understood nothing, and I was frightened. I loved them, all three.

I never saw Gerry again. When I came next day she was not there. Dave looked ill. But Nickie played the victrola almost all the time. He walked about with a curious lightness, as if he were pleased. But Dave looked sick. I could feel that Gerry was gone, so I asked, 'Where's Gerry?'

'She's gone,' Dave said.

I caught my breath. 'For good?'

'No!' he cried. 'No, indeed. Not if I can help it! She'll be back, boy — don't worry.'

Nickie looked at him a little archly and smiled to himself. Dave did not see.

But waiting for Gerry to come back seemed long, and each day I would ask Dave if she would come on that day. Sometimes he did not answer. Sometimes he still said, weakly, that she'd come back, that he'd bring her back. And sometimes he said no, he didn't think she'd ever come back again. He said this with pain, and his face showed his pain when he said it.

My aunt began to wonder what was going on, so one day she invited the two men to supper. I remember how we sat: my aunt in her usual place next to the sideboard, Dave to the left of her, Nickie to the right, his head framed by the window through which we saw the sunset, and I between them, opposite Aunt. She had invited them there because she hoped to discover something about them, and something about Gerry.

'What's happened to the Mrs.?' she asked Dave after we sat down.

'She's gone to the city for a visit.'

'You expecting her back?'

'It depends how long we stay,' he said.

'I see,' said Aunt Selina, obviously unsatisfied.

She made a few more efforts to draw them out, but her efforts were without reward. The men ate her food and Nickie was very gracious throughout the meal, but both were, really, aloof and inscrutable. There was nothing to be learned. After supper they declined my aunt's invitation to play a few hands of five hundred and went back across the road into the cottage.

Now we often heard Nickie's songs on the phonograph, every day and night the strains of his songs floating out on the summer air, spasmodic, jerky tunes, like 'I'm Forever

Blowing Bubbles' and 'Sleepy-Time Gal.' Sometimes, over the shrill sounds, I would remember Gerry's song, the imagined sound of that song sweet and clear above the racket of Nickie's records. Perhaps Dave heard that voice, too, sometimes; at any rate, he didn't like Nickie's songs, and sometimes I heard his voice in anger when Nickie insisted on playing one or another of them. Dave liked different music, that music which we didn't hear so often now, 'classics,' my Aunt Selina said, 'symphonies and operas.' Sometimes at night, though, long after I had gone to bed, I would look out of my window and see him striding back and forth along the narrow room while the phonograph boomed out the music that he and Gerry liked. But he did not play this music often. Usually he seemed content to sit dully by while Nickie played his records. And now he very seldom wrote any more.

The weather turned very hot and they took to swimming in the river. I used to wade out to the sand bar where they would lie in the sun almost naked for whole afternoons, talking together in low voices which excluded me, and sometimes they would stretch out and yawn and seem to sleep. Then I would pretend to sleep, and after a while I would hear their voices start up again, low, soft, Dave speaking gently in his gruff voice about what he planned to write, Nickie usually saying little, listening. And once I saw Dave bring his hand to Nickie's head and let his fingers rove through his tumbled hair, glistening in the sun, and the heavy hand coming from the hair at last to lie still on Nickie's smooth cheek. Nickie's eyes were closed against the sun's glare, and his bronzed arms and legs were flung out motionless on the hot sand. He lay there as if he were dead, unfeeling under Dave's hand.

Dave had become less unhappy without Gerry. He was nervous and distracted, almost never noticed me around any more, or anything else around him; but he did not really seem unhappy without Gerry now. Neither of them ever mentioned her, and I asked about her no more. Only I seemed to

remember how<sup>r</sup> lovely she had been there. The look of resentment was always in Dave's face, but there was also a kind of helplessness, as if there were nothing to be done about anything. Less and less did the dull brooding in his eyes flare up into his old anger at Nickie, and Nickie went about very blithely.

But all this ended soon, long before the summer was out. One evening late in July my aunt had gone to a card party, with instructions that I go to bed at eight-thirty, and I was sitting on the front porch steps. In the cottage across the street the phonograph started to grind out one of Nickie's jerky songs, and then I thought I heard sounds of scuffling. I ran across the road and, from behind the maple tree, looked through the window. Nickie was standing with his back to the phonograph and Dave stood facing him, seemed to tower over him, threatening him, I thought. The record screamed out over the sounds of their voices, over Nickie's voice raised high in spite, over Dave's voice, low and very angry.

'Take it off!' he ordered.

With an almost visible effort Nickie forced his voice to be calm. 'Don't be absurd. It's my record. I'll play it as long and as often as I wish!'

'Oh, will you?' Dave shouted, and lunged at the machine. His big hand darted out and tore the record from the whirling disc, and there was a sharp, ripping noise as the needle scratched across its finely corrugated surface. He lifted the record up and flung it furiously against the white wall, where it smashed into flying fragments that clattered noisily to the floor in the silence that had fallen over the room. Nickie's face went white as chalk. Then he made a dive for the case where Dave kept his records, but Dave pulled him away by the shoulders and sent him sprawling to the floor.

'You bitch!' Nickie screamed.

Dave said nothing, but his face was flushed a deep red, and was grim in anger such as I had never seen. He fell upon

Nickie with a groan, and they tussled about on the floor, and then I heard Nickie cry sharply, in agony, 'Stop it! Stop it! You're hurting me!' and reach up and scratch Dave's face, leaving bleeding traces where his nails tore the skin, and his clutching hands grasped at Dave's throat, slipped away, and then pulled at his shirt and ripped it to ragged shreds. Somehow Nickie managed to scramble to his feet, and he stood away, panting, trembling, and then collapsed on the sofa.

Dave, his face running blood, his shirt in streamers on his back, made swiftly for the door, and I ducked behind the tree. He came out and walked rapidly away. I came from behind the tree and looked through the window again. Nickie lay stretched out stiffly on the sofa, his eyes closed, one hand on his chest.

After a long while, Dave came back, hurrying, his heels striking sharply on the wooden walk. Behind the tree I waited.

In the cottage Dave went immediately to the sofa and bent over Nickie. In a shaking voice he asked, 'Are you all right?'

Nickie opened his eyes and looked at him. He said nothing.

I saw Dave's pitying eyes as he looked at Nickie. 'It's no good, it's no good!' he cried. 'What in hell's name are we doing here?'

Nickie sat up. He seemed to be all right now. He said, 'You're so stubborn. You don't give me a chance.'

That changed Dave's feelings. The sorrow went out of his face, and his mouth hardened, and his eyes blazed with anger. He poured out a torrent of recrimination. 'Why did you come here, for Christ's sake? Why couldn't you let us alone? What *right* had you to put your filthy hands on me? What motive, for God's sake? Can't you bear to think of me as happy? I loathe you! And I'm through! I'll find Gerry! I'll get her back! And you get the hell out, get out and stay out! Don't let me see you again! *I despise you!*'

Nickie stood up. All of Dave's rage had seemed to fill him

with a curious pride. He walked to Dave's table and lit a cigarette. Then he turned around slowly and sneered as he said, 'You'll always blame someone else, won't you? Me, now. Next year, someone else. You're past saving. A world of Gerrys couldn't mother you back, Davie. Wake up.'

Dave's huge frame sank huddled to the sofa. Outside I could hear his sobs. Nickie had won in whatever mad struggle this was that involved them.

The warm night wind blew across my face. It was long after eight-thirty. In the cottage there was darkness now, for Nickie had turned out the lights, and silence. Outside, there was only the sighing of the wind swaying the branches of the maple trees overhead.

I went home and to bed, and wondered and thought I heard their voices, lost in the wind that blew softly through the tree-tops, and the sound of Gerry's song lost . . . and slept . . . and dreamed of them.

They left Green Glade next day. They came over to my aunt's house early that morning and said that they were leaving, that they had to go back. Go back where? I wanted to ask. Where did you come from and why are you here and where are you going? And where is Gerry? I wanted to ask. But didn't.

That afternoon they carried all the furniture they had borrowed back across the street and up into my aunt's garret. They packed up the books and the phonograph and the typewriters, and the dray came and took the cases to the depot. That night they took the train out of Green Glade.

I was waiting on the porch of my aunt's house when they came out with their bags and locked the cottage door. They crossed the street and asked me where my aunt was. I called her and when she came out they said good-bye. Nickie looked very subdued, all his gaiety gone. He stood quietly beside Dave, like a boy who has been punished. Dave had a scowl on his face, just as he had had on that afternoon when he first

arrived. I saw the scars where Nickie had scratched him. I felt like crying. I wanted to seize Dave's hand and tell him how sorry I was, but I couldn't. I swallowed and stood by silently.

'Good-bye, boy,' he said to me at last.

I gulped. I could not say good-bye to him.

'Good-bye,' said Nickie.

But I could not answer him either. He looked very sad, very repentant.

Then finally they went away. As they started down the street I began to cry. 'Dave! Dave!' I called after him. And, 'Nickie!'

They turned around and waved to me, but they did not stop.

'Lord, child, what's the matter with you?' Aunt Selina asked.

'Oh, Aunt, I don't know,' I cried.

'Well, they were nice boys, but why cry about them?'

'I don't know, oh, Aunt, I don't know,' I blubbered, and looked across the street at the dark, deserted cottage.

'Time for bed now,' she said then, a little cross with me.

I went to bed, lost and desolate with their leaving, as still in the wind-stirred trees outside my window I thought I heard the far-away sound of Gerry's song, singing high and clear of that land which, after all, they never found.



## 4

### *Boy in the Summer Sun*

UNALLOYED, summer had lingered miraculously into late September without a suggestion that autumn was at hand. Leaves and grass were green still, smoke had not yet come into the air, and the lake was calm, almost sapphire blue. Mid-mornings were hot, like mornings in July. So they walked where the woods were thickest, where the air was always slightly damp and the cool of night never quite gone. They did not speak much but went silently along the path, almost shoulder to shoulder, their hands touching, or their arms, as they moved. Now and then the girl spoke, quietly, briefly pointed out a bird, a flower, once a green snake gliding through the grass, and the boy answered with a nod or a monosyllable, his face touched with abstraction and a slight worry. After they came to a place in the wood where they stretched out now with their arms about each other lightly as if the place and this gesture were habitual, they did not speak at all until at last the girl, Rachel, asked suddenly, 'Why are you so quiet? Is it Max? Are you angry because he's coming, Will?'

The boy started and looked into her face. 'Angry? No, I'm not angry . . . I was just thinking about that lousy job. When I'm out here it's hard to believe that a job like that can be waiting for me when I get back.'

The girl looked away into the depth of the wood. 'Is it, Will?' she asked. 'Or is it just that in college we never learn that for most people life finally comes down to work?'

'Maybe that's it.'

'Or is it foul, Will? Is it worse than most jobs in the city, in summer?'

'Maybe not. But it's still foul.'

They were quiet again, and it seemed a long time later, to him, when Rachel said, 'Anyway, I'm glad it isn't Max.'

His arms tightened around her shoulders. Then he sat up, his eyes narrowed in the shade, and he asked, 'Why should it be?'

She said, 'It shouldn't.'

He lay down beside her again. He stared up into the lace-work of green leaves arched above them, and at the rare patches of blue sky that the leaves did not cover. Why should it be Max? Or why should she think it might be?

He had been awakened that morning by the ringing telephone, and lay sleepily in bed listening to Rachel's voice talking to someone in a way that did disturb him vaguely then, although now it seemed only mildly irritating that this week-end should be intruded upon. 'But darling!' her voice had cried over the telephone. 'What are you doing here? Come over at once! Mind? Of course not! We'll love it! In two hours? Good!'

When he came to breakfast, she smiled brightly and cried, 'Guess who's coming, Will! Max Garey! He got bored and started out early this morning, and just now called from the village. Isn't it grand? Mother's so fond of him — she'll take care of him.'

'Does your mother know him? I didn't know she did.'

'Oh, yes! I must have told you.'

'No, you didn't,' he said. And now he wondered why she had not told him.

Then Mrs. Harley came out on the porch. 'Good morning, Will,' she said brightly as she patted her white hair. 'Isn't it *nice* that Mr. Garey can come! I'm so fond of Mr. Garey!'

'Yes, isn't it?' Will said into his coffee, and looked across the table into Rachel's eyes, which, shining with pleasure, were heedless of the question in his.

'Did you have any work with Mr. Garey, Will? Rachel thought him such a splendid teacher.'

'No, I didn't,' Will said. 'His classes were always filled with girls.'

Rachel looked at him quickly. 'Now you're being unfair, Will. Everybody thinks he's a good teacher.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, and felt suddenly lonely in the bright morning with Rachel only across the table from him.

He was feeling that loneliness again now. 'Maybe it is more than the job,' he said. 'Everything's different since June. I don't know why.'

'What do you mean, Will?'

'Just a feeling that everything's breaking up.'

They were quiet then until Rachel said, 'I know. I'm different, too. Something's changed in me. There's something sad, some ache . . .'

Will knew that something had changed in her. She was older than she had been in June. There was something about her now that bewildered him, the feeling that she lived without him, an aloofness and self-sufficiency which was new. She was like a woman, sometimes, putting up with a boy. He had felt it almost every week-end, and this and the more general sadness of the summer had darkened otherwise bright hours. Yet her kisses, her sweet arms around him, her yielding body, all denied his feeling. With him, there still came from her throat a little moan of pain and passion which he knew no one else had ever heard. And yet, now in the deep cool wood as she lay in his arms, he felt that she had forgotten him beside her.

She spoke at last as with an effort, as if recalling herself from a dream. 'You know, Will, after you left college, in that week I stayed on, I saw Max rather often. Then mother met

him. She invited him to come up. He was here earlier in the summer. Didn't I tell you?'

'No,' he said, his throat contracting. 'You must have forgotten.'

His sadness knotted in his throat intensely, and he remembered then very clearly, almost as if she were saying it again now, something she had said before he left her in June. 'Sometimes I wonder if this can last. We know each other as I think people almost never do. Now it begins to seem a little unreal, perhaps because it's been too lovely, part of this unreal life we're leaving. I wonder if that sometimes happens, Will.'

Then he had laughed; but now, as he remembered, his arms tightened around her suddenly, as if from fright, and he leaned down and kissed her. Her lips were quiet, without response. He saw that her eyes were fixed on some remote object in the arch of trees or beyond, some dream, something far from him. He stood up and moved away. 'Let's go back,' he said, and without waiting for her started quickly up the path, toward the house.

All the afternoon they lay on the raft, Rachel between them. Max talked, his voice reflective and lazy, mixing with the sun of that afternoon and the endless laziness in the sounds that insects made in the woods and in the long grass along the shore, his voice spinning itself out, pausing now and then to listen to itself, and going on again, with Rachel lying quiet between them, her eyes closed and the oil gleaming on her brown skin. Will's head was turned toward her, his eyes wandering back and forth from her parted lips and her gleaming lashes to the swell of her breasts under her white swimming suit, to her long browned legs and her crossed feet at the end of the raft.

All the time Max's voice went on, the lazy, professor's voice. Will could tell as he heard it that it was a voice that always talked and that always had listeners, and yet, now, it did not irritate him. He was almost content to lie in the

sun with the sensation of burning on his skin, the soft warm glow of skin absorbing bright sun enough in the afternoon to allay for the moment the morning's inarticulate fears, even though it was Max who was lying stretched out beyond Rachel, who was talking, pausing, talking, sometimes falling silent and no word coming from Rachel or himself, and then starting up again, the voice spinning itself out softly in the afternoon sun, with all the laziness of the afternoon in his slow words.

'... and so in Donne the central factor is death . . . death, of course . . . he, more than any of the poets, built what he wrote upon what may be called a metaphysic of death . . . death as the great leveler on the one hand, the great destroyer of everything, beauty, love . . . and death as the figure at the gate of Heaven . . . these two, this one . . . the central factor, always present . . .'

His voice was slow, modulated, a little affected, quite soft, and in it, Will knew as he looked at Rachel's face, there was some magic of wisdom and experience that enthralled her.

Rachel's voice began, slow and soft as if infected by Max's voice, as warm as the sun, and speaking lines that Max first spoke to her, perhaps — only perhaps — in the classroom:

'When I died last, and, Dear, I die

As often as from thee I go,

Though it be but an hour ago,

And Lovers hours be full eternity,

I can remember yet, that I

Something did say, and something did bestow. . . .'

Max laughed. 'But darling,' he said, 'that's still another kind of death, not so serious.'

Rachel said nothing. And the sun wove around them its bright and golden web, and the whole world then as they lay there had slipped away and left the three of them stranded together in an unreality of sunlight on burning skin and closed eyelids, and nothing more. And Will, too, felt out of

the world of fact, was empty of feeling, as if pure sensation had replaced it. And only slowly did a faint jangling come into his mind, the jangle of Max's word *darling*, like something shaken in a metal box, some harsh sound, or a feeling perhaps, shaking him abruptly from the web. He stirred. He turned. And in turning the web was broken, and he was free of it again, his hand plunged in the cold blue water of the lake and left to dangle there, his eyes turned from Rachel and Max for the moment but seeing nothing in the indeterminable depths of the blue water that gently lapped his hand.

'Not nearly so serious,' Max said. 'Only a metaphor, a way of speaking . . .'

Will turned toward them again and he saw in Rachel's face how serious it was, for she looked suddenly ill for all the glow of her skin, her face turned away from him and her lips fallen apart, and every line in her face and body taut suddenly, yearning, aching suddenly with sharp longing, sharp pain, she quite sick for love. Will's hands closed at his sides and opened again, turned empty to the sun.

'Poetry is full of such conventions, formalized short cuts to express familiar sentiments,' Max was saying. 'In Donne, of course, there's enough fire, usually, to vitalize them, but in others . . . mere metaphors . . .'

Something in Will's mind snapped, then seemed to shout, *Who cares? For God's sake, who cares?* He was enraged beyond endurance by the man's pompous classroom manner, his easy presence, his way of excluding Will, as if he were alone with Rachel and no one else existed. He hated him, and the very presence of Rachel there made his throat ache with something like the pressure of tears coming. The sun had lost its spell. The buzz of insects on the shore seemed for a moment unbearably loud, and the sun no longer warm, but hot, searing, parching his throat and mouth, blinding him. For now he hated Max, and he knew as he remembered Rachel's voice speaking those lines, that she was lost to him,

that he had nothing more for her, that Max had all. And there Max lay, as if he belonged there, had every right to be there, talking and priding himself in his talk, delighting to hear his own words, lecturing as though he were in the classroom and Rachel in the front row looking up at him with wide eyes, lecturing as though Rachel and he were alone in the room and Will did not exist.

Will's eyes clouded in anger as he stared down into the water disturbed by his hand. He tried not to hear what their low voices said, and only when they were silent did he turn again suddenly on the raft to see how their bodies had moved together, so that their legs touched, and Max's hand lay quite near Rachel's hair. He stood abruptly, stirring the raft in the water, and then dived deep, swam quickly out and away from them, his arms beating the water in his anger, in a frantic effort to forget the hurt which came from Rachel's willing reception of the man's intolerable arrogance.

He struck out into the lake. The water was cold on his skin, and as he swam his anger cooled. But when his anger was gone, he felt sad and futile again, swam more slowly, felt helpless and wounded, felt almost weak in the water, so that he grew angry with himself instead and wished that he could hold that other anger. When he turned back and swam slowly toward the shore, only the hurt remained, and he did not go to the raft. There Max's words would still be spinning themselves out in the sunlight, catching Rachel's mind in their spell, catching her heart firmly and her whole mind and life, and holding them there, as if the words were really magic.

He walked up the beach and stretched out on the sand. He lay on his back and looked up into the blue sky, and as he lay there he felt suddenly that this was the last time in his life that he would be doing quite this. All summer he had been coming from the sweltering, grimy city, and in seeing Rachel in the country, in living in her mother's friendly

house, in swimming and dancing and drinking and finding cool spots in the woods where the moss was thick and only the trees and birds made sound — in all of this it had seemed that nothing had changed or was ending. And this in spite of the fact that when they parted in June, when they walked for the last time along familiar walks between familiar buildings, they had vaguely felt that an end had come to a period, that a new life was waiting for both of them, and that (Rachel felt) somehow they were therefore ending for one another. But then Max was nothing to him, only a professor whom she liked; so for him nothing really ended.

Now the golden day was unbearable. He turned over on his stomach and put his face in his arms. Almost at once he could feel the sun burning his neck, his back. But it alleviated nothing. There was the dull ache in his chest and throat, the constant feeling that at any moment he would cry out like a child in sobs. It was a pressure in his body that he could not put into thoughts, only the feeling that something was ending, inevitably ending. He thought of his past and it was all gold, all brightness and gold, all magic landscape, all love, all an idyl, all a bright day, and all ending.

He thought he must cry. All his youth was gathered into a knot of pain that choked him, that, dull and heavy, pressed against his heart. He thought of going back to the city, to the hot office, to stupid work sweating over accounts, of the years he had ahead of him in which to slave there. And he knew as he lay in the sand, really *knew* for the first time, that all of that was no mere interlude.

He felt a touch on his shoulder, turned, and looked up. It was Rachel, brown in the sun, saying, 'Darling, don't be rude.'

He sat up. 'Am I being rude?'

'Does he bore you?'

'Yes. I don't like him much.'

'Well, I'm sorry he came, Will, but I couldn't help it.'

Come back and try to bear him. He's not bad, you know.'

'No?' Will asked as he got up.

She looked at him swiftly, then smiled. 'Don't be silly, darling.'

'No, *darling*.'

'Good.'

Then they went up the shore, back to the raft where Max still lay in the lessening glare of the sun.

Then finally he could put up with him no longer. The whole thing, suddenly, was impossible, too much for him. He sat at the table for a minute more and fought against the impulse to leave. But Mrs. Harley, cooing in a voice that almost made him ill ('But how *interesting*, Mr. Garey. *Do go on!* Do you *really* believe that?') and Max, toying with his fork and smiling with what Will supposed was great 'charm' before continuing his monologue, decided him. He looked quickly at Rachel. She sat at the end of the table, opposite her mother. She looked very cool in a white dress, brown throat and arms cool and lovely, her lips slightly parted, her eyes fixed — lost to him.

Then he rose quickly to his feet. 'Excuse me, please,' he said, and went to the porch, and then outside, down the steps, stumbled down toward the shore under the pines. He sat down in the grass. His fingers fumbled for a cigarette and a match in his pocket. Then he stared out at the water and the new moon hanging close over the opposite shore. In the reeds the frogs sang. From above came the ring of silver on china. He bit hard into his lower lip when he knew suddenly that the salt he tasted was of tears.

Then everything broke, collapsed in him like a sail when the wind dies. He wept as he had not wept since he was a small boy; and there, for a time in the night, he felt that he was a small boy still, alone in the dark and empty night. He lay on the grass and sobbed, and there was a violence in his

weeping as of a body tortured. He smothered the sound in the grass.

But he could not smother the pain in his chest. It was like a live thing in his heart, heavy and pressing, torturing, not relieved by sobs. It came over him in waves of torment, and now it was no longer anything of the mind, but of the body alone, a physical pressure, wracking and violent, eruptive and convulsive, as if his very life, well-loved, were ending in the torment.

He did not feel Rachel's hand on his shoulder. It was her voice that recalled him: 'Will — darling — please!'

Even then he could not prevent his sobs from coming. It was as if they were something separate from him, separate from his will, as if they had their own life, must come to their own slow end. He felt no shame before her, had no feelings at all, no thoughts, was given over entirely to what seemed wholly a physical act. Then slowly, at last, his shoulders grew quieter. Slowly his breathing quieted. Slowly his eyes dried. And it was over at last. He felt empty, weak, desolate as he turned slowly over on his back to look at her.

The moon was almost in the water. He could see it, touching the opposite shore. The sky was dark, sprinkled with cold stars. These too he saw, blurred and faint, unsteady in the darkness. Beside him knelt Rachel, her white dress a vague lightness, her face above him a blur. She spoke again; 'Darling, what is it, what's *wrong?*'

He swallowed hard but could not speak. He lay on his back and looked at the blur of her face. His hand reached out and seized hers, held it tightly. Then she lay down beside him suddenly, put her arms around him, and her cheek to his mouth. He smelled the familiar perfume of her hair and moved away from her a little. Now he could see the stars more clearly; their light was brighter, harder, they were steadier in the sky, fixed and remote. Then, although Rachel's arms were around him and her face so close that he

could feel her warm breath sweet on his face, he was alone, desolate, empty, alone on the shore under the stars. He did not say this then, nor did he even quite feel it, but he knew it, his body, empty and quiet, knew it — the cold loneliness of the stars even on a summer night. He lay still and looked up. Something momentous had happened.

'I felt sick,' he said at last, though Rachel had not spoken again.

She said nothing for a while, then whispered, 'I'm sorry.'

'It's all right now.'

As if startled by the deadly quiet of his voice, she sat up and looked closely into his face. 'Are you all right now, Will?'

'Yes, it's all right now.' He said it clearly.

'What was it, though?' she asked.

'You know.'

'No.'

'Yes, you do.'

'Not *Max*, Will?'

'What else?'

'Oh, but *darling* ——'

'It doesn't matter, Rachel.'

'What do you mean — doesn't matter? Do you think ——'

'I know, Rachel. I knew it this morning. But only tonight, suddenly, at the table, when I saw your face while he was talking — it took that long until I really could believe it. But it doesn't matter now.'

'You think I love him?'

'You do love him.'

Then she did not answer.

'Yesterday I wouldn't have believed that things like this happen. For over a year . . .' He paused. Then, 'Nothing will ever be the same again — love, or anything.'

'Please, Will. Nothing's happened.'

'Everything's happened. Now it's over.'

She looked at him closely. Then she said, 'I've never

heard you talk like that. You're different. Your voice—it's . . .'

'What?'

'You're different. Your voice frightens me. It's so quiet and cold and far away, so different —' She spoke jerkily. 'So dead!'

He sat up, leaned back on his elbows. The moon was gone, sunk under the water. The sky was darker, and the stars seemed brighter still, separate, and farther away. Then he lay down again and she beside him. They were both very quiet. Finally she said, 'Do you hate me?'

He turned to her. 'No,' he answered. He watched her face. He saw her eyes sparkling with tears. He said, 'What are you crying for?'

'I can't tell you why, I can't say, I don't know. I'm afraid. I do love you, Will. Only now I'm afraid, because I do love someone else — more. I don't want to. But I do. It frightens me!'

Now she was no longer older than he. She was a girl again, her woman's poise, given her briefly by this new love, taken from her again by that same love because, in the face of it, she was afraid. She was afraid of its swiftness, of what it might hold, of her own heart, turning. Now he felt older than she, felt that he could tell her something. He said, 'I know what it is. It isn't just that we've been in love. We've had such a fine time. I don't know if I can say this, but it's something like this anyway — you weren't just yourself for me, and I wasn't just myself for you. We were both in love with much more than each other. You were all of that life for me, and maybe I was that for you, too. We were that whole life for each other, and we didn't want to lose it, but we couldn't help ourselves, we couldn't keep it any longer.'

She was crying. She put her face on his shoulder and he felt her tears on his neck. Then he put his arms around her and held her close. But he felt no less alone. And he thought

then that this aloneness would never entirely leave him again, but that when he got back to the city next day, after he had been there awhile, working in the office, after a week or two or perhaps a whole year, finally anyway, it would have left him somewhat less empty, less deadly calm. Then this day and this summer and all the golden days would have become the dream; and the other life would be real.

'How did your poem go, Rachel? "When I last died, and, dear, I die whenever you go from me. . . .?"'

'Please — don't,' she said.

He began to stroke her hair. She was quiet now, no longer crying, held close in his arms. He said, 'Maybe it's always like this. Maybe the end of every love is a kind of little death, when you have to put behind more than just the love itself, but all the life, too, in which the love was wrapped. Maybe living is really a lot of little dyings.'

For a moment more they sat together and then she said, 'We must go back. They'll wonder . . .'

'All right,' he said.

Then, clinging together like children still under the stars, helping each other up the slope, they went back to the house, where the lights were and the sounds of voices.



# 5

## *For Winter Nights*

WHEN I WAS A SMALL BOY I used to go to Green Glade every summer to stay with my Aunt Selina for a few weeks, but when I was twelve years old, these visits stopped, and ten years passed before I went back again for more than a day or two at a time. In those ten years I had forgotten all about Anna Brettly.

My mind was occupied with self-indulgent and reproachful thoughts of another girl. She was thin, with long legs and a brown skin and serious eyes and a mouth that looked a little as though it had been hurt, and there was some warmth in her that begs description. She had loved me and then she no longer loved me, and the hurt became mine. I gave up a job in a city and went to live with my aunt in the country. I was going to write, only to discover that sentimentality is an even greater barrier to that activity than it is to most. Anna Brettly helped me to discover the name my feelings should properly have had.

I came to Green Glade in November, and it was on one of the first bleak days there that I saw her again. She was beating her way against the wind over a barren ridge of hill, her head bent forward, the wind whipping her skirt about her legs and showing every line of her thin body. It was not a shock to see her there, but it made me curious, for I remembered in an instant the way the boys in the post office used to laugh at her and how one day ten years earlier I had found

her weeping on the crest of the same hill toward which both of us were now making our way.

Twice a day my Aunt Selina used to send me to the post office for her mail, and while I was waiting for it, Anna Brettly used to come in for hers. There was seldom a letter for her, seldom anything except an occasional catalogue or advertisement which she would tuck away unread into the black leather bag she carried. And the older boys waiting around in the post office used to laugh at her, snicker and whisper to each other and sometimes ask, 'Hey, Annie, where's Fred?' or 'What happened to Fred, anyway?' and then guffaw and poke each other in the ribs and seem very pleased with themselves.

She never answered their questions. I didn't know what the boys meant and I don't remember if I cared, but I felt sorry for Anna, because she was pretty and looked lonely and afraid. She was tall and thin, had dark eyes and hair and a soft mouth that trembled when the boys taunted her. Even then her dress seemed vaguely old-fashioned, and she carried herself with an antique delicacy. She always wore a black velvet ribbon around her slender neck, and in the early weeks of the summer, a bunch of dog violets tucked in her belt. Her face was pale, or perhaps it only seemed pale because she always wore black dresses. She would stand silently looking out of the window of the post office with her hands clasped together under her breasts until the mail was unpacked and then always went quickly from the post office and hurried up the street with her head bent so that she did not have to say hello to anyone.

I used to see her on the hills, too. The hills stretched along the other side of the river for several miles, and it used to be fun to go across the bridge and wander around all day, chasing gophers, or lie on my back watching the clouds, or find birds' nests. Anna never wandered, but would go as far as Roundtop and stay there. Sometimes she just sat down in

the tall grass and looked across the river, but usually she was on her knees or bent over a stone, trying to move it, and her hands would be feeling all over the ground as if she were looking for something. Once I came up to her without making any noise and stood for a while watching her run her hands through the grass.

She jumped up from her knees and looked at me and I saw that she was crying, but she didn't speak. She stared at me for a few moments and then walked away toward the bridge. I looked around in the grass for a while thinking that I might find something, but I didn't, and then I forgot all about her and whatever it was she had lost on Roundtop.

All this I remembered in the instant that I saw her again, and it seemed in that moment, though these things were ten years dead, that no day had passed.

The wind was strong and blew painfully in my eyes as I watched Anna come to the end of the path and start up the side of Roundtop. I followed the path until I came to the foot of the hill and then I started climbing, too. The grass was dead and the trees bare, except for a few oaks whose browned leaves rattled crisply in the wind. Anna was on top by this time and the hill looked very lonely from the bottom with nothing on it but the bare trees and the figure of that woman standing out sharp and tall against the dark sky.

When I came to the top of the hill she was on her knees just as she had been that day more than ten years before, searching for something in the dead grass. I coughed to get her attention and expected her to wheel upon me as she had done that other time. But she didn't even get up. She turned around slowly and then sank back on the ground, bracing herself with one arm. She didn't have a hat on and the wind kept blowing the loose hair around into her face. I saw that it was half gray, that her face was gaunt and sunburned, that the mouth I remembered as so soft was hard

and chapped. She was much thinner and there seemed to be no breasts under the coarse black dress. Ten years had indeed passed. She stared at me.

'Are you looking for something?' I asked finally.

'We're having a picnic down in the valley and he threw it away somewhere here, at the very top of the hill, I'm not quite sure where, but I think about here. . . .' She turned her head and looked at the ground as she pushed the grass aside with one hand.

'What are you looking for? Perhaps I can help you?'

She stood up and smiled so brightly that her gaunt face looked weird. 'Oh, would you? Thank you. Yes. We are having a picnic down in Wright's Valley and they're waiting for me and I must find it soon or the picnic will be over, won't it?' She laughed.

'Yes, I'm afraid so,' I said, 'but what is it you're looking for?'

She sighed and the bright smile was gone. Big tears suddenly stood in her black eyes, giving life to the shadows round them, and her hard lips trembled. 'Oh Fred . . . oh Fred . . .' she said desolately.

As I watched the big tears roll down her brown cheeks, I tried to find something to say, but there was nothing. In a moment, however, her grief was over, and with the tears still running down her cheeks as if they had no real relation to sorrow, she began to fasten her hair at the back of her head. Then she looked at me and smiled again. 'We've been picking daisies,' she said, and opened the black bag that lay at her feet to show me the dried heads of a half-dozen daisies. 'Pretty . . .' she mused. The bag was the same I remembered from childhood, but now its corners were tattered and one of its gold clasps was broken off. A tear glittered like a gem on the coarse cloth of her blouse.

'Shall we look for it now?' I suggested.

'Oh, yes. Now, it should be about here. He was sitting

there and I was sitting here beside him and he took it out of his pocket, and then he showed it to me. I was pleased, as you may well imagine, and he's waiting for me in the valley now; so I must find it and go back down there.'

The wind came lashing up over the top of the hill and blew her skirt out before her. She pressed it down with her hands and, noticing a burr caught on its hem, bent down to brush that off. For a moment she was occupied with her finger where a thorn had drawn a drop of blood, but presently she was on her knees again, feeling and refeeeling the ground where she knelt.

'Do you know,' she said as she searched, 'I don't think I should have told him, though I've been thinking all along I ought to tell him, before our wedding sometime, and when we sat here talking a little while ago I knew I'd tell him to-day. Then, when I saw it, I couldn't keep it back any longer and so I told him. Now, let's see. I said, "Fred, there is something . . ."'

She broke off her speech and lifted her face. Her eyes were clouded with preoccupation, and her hands lay listlessly in her lap. She began singing to herself, 'There is something, there is something . . .' over and over to the same few wavering notes. Her song had no relation to joy.

Suddenly she stood up. She came close to me and looked into my face. I saw only her great dark eyes for a moment. 'You know where he is?' she asked, and before I could answer, turned her face toward the river and looked at the town beyond. I heard her sigh in an interval when the wind died down. She looked at the ground for a moment and then took a few hesitant steps away from me. I heard her say again, 'Oh Fred, there is something . . .' before the wind blew up and whipped her words into silence and her skirt into a billow of cloth. I watched her go slowly down the hill and along the path and saw her disappear under the trees that arched the path where it joined the bridge. Then I followed her slowly back to the town.

When my Aunt Selina explained that as Anna Brettly had grown queerer and queerer she had become ever more willing to talk to people and had in ten years lost all of her first reticence, I decided that possibly the villagers had never found out about her simply because they hadn't bothered to question her in recent years; so I began to watch for her. I didn't meet her on the hills for some days, and in the post office, where I saw her twice each day standing gaunt and alone in a corner, I didn't feel free to speak to her. One day I did find her on Roundtop again. It was near dusk, and she was sitting in the open expanse at the top of the hill, shivering under the thin coat she wore, for it was the middle of November, and quite cold.

She watched me come near and nodded with a vague indifference as I sat down beside her. 'You'll catch cold out here like this,' I said.

'No, I won't.'

'Your coat isn't very heavy.'

She looked at me across her shoulder. 'It's getting dark,' she said. 'I ought to begin looking, for they'll be packing up and leaving in the valley, and I won't have it — and until I find it, I won't find Fred. Do you know where he is?'

'No, I don't. But it's too dark to find it tonight, don't you think?'

'Oh, but I must find it,' she said, not moving at all. 'I must find it soon, for soon even the singing will be over. And if I find it, he'll come back and we can get married and then he'll forget about Barton, won't he?'

'Yes, of course. But where is Barton, anyway?'

'Barton? Oh, well, you see, he went away and Fred went away, too, and . . . where is Fred?'

She got up from the ground quickly and I heard her teeth chatter. A chill wind was blowing from the north, sweeping over the hills, bending the silhouettes of slim trees toward the south. In the near darkness, Anna Brettly's face was a

gray blur. She said, 'If you see Fred, will you tell him for me...'

She was already on her way, her dark shape half lost in the November dusk that shrouded the hills, and presently lost entirely.

I stayed in the town all that winter, and I continued my tramps through the woods and hills, but Anna did not, to my knowledge, appear on Roundtop while there was snow there. Now and then in the streets or in the post office I saw her, clad in flapping skirts and cloaks of a dead era, an eccentric figure to which the villagers had long since become accustomed, and I had even less occasion than they to talk to her.

I was trying to write a book, but without conspicuous success, and the news that the man who had taken my girl from me had now jilted her did not help me. I hoped vindictively that she was as unhappy as I had been, and only when I grew most lonely in the empty little town did I even think of writing her in the hope of beginning again where we had left off. The winter passed, and I had not written her.

Then in March Fred Grant came back to Green Glade for his mother-in-law's funeral.

On the morning of the burial, I was in the post office as usual. Anna Brettly was there, too, clutching her shabby old black bag in her scrawny hands, standing quietly back in a corner. Then a stranger came in. He was a good-looking man, rather tall, with a thin cruel mouth and blond hair turning gray. I looked at him as he entered and wondered who he was when I saw him nod to one or two of the older people who were waiting for their mail. Then I heard Anna.

*'Fred!'*

She sobbed it out, her hands over her mouth, the black bag lying on the floor. Then she started across the room, kicking the bag as she ran. She clutched the man's lapels, and looked

into his face with hungry eyes bright as I had never known them, her mouth half open. 'Fred! You've come now! Oh, I knew you'd come, I knew you'd come, forget, forgive . . .' She turned and looked at the astounded villagers around her and a happy, brittle laugh came from her throat. 'It's Fred! Can't you see? Fred Grant!' She flung her arms around his neck. 'Oh, I thought you wouldn't come back until I found it! How silly of me! Oh Fred, I'm so *glad!*' She let her weight sag against his chest.

He was embarrassed. He took her by the shoulders and held her away from him. 'Who has a car?' he asked us. 'The woman is ill. Someone had better take her home.' His voice was cold and precise.

Some man volunteered. Fred Grant took her arm and began to lead her to the door, but she had hardly moved before she started to struggle with him and in a moment stood free, panting. Her eyes were bright still, but now their glitter was scornful. Her mouth trembled. She looked down at her feet and then stooped to pick up the old bag which had opened and scattered its flower dust on the floor. 'I'm sorry,' Anna Brettly said. 'I'm all right now. I'll go alone. I'm all right.' She walked quickly by Fred Grant without looking at him, and when she reached the street, began to run.

At dinner that noon I told my aunt about Fred Grant's appearance in the post office and how it had seemed that Anna Brettly had come to her senses at last. I tried to describe that bright look in her eyes when she had flung herself against his chest, and that other brightness, too, when she had scorned him.

So when I went across the river to the hills that afternoon, it was not in the hope of finding Anna there. It was a balmy day, almost April, and in a previous year, she would certainly have gone there. But faced with the facts of her sad history, her fantasy had dissolved, and she would search the ground

no more. And so it was something of a shock to meet her on Roundtop when I came there, to see her sitting on the barren ground gazing reflectively off to the town beyond the river as if nothing unusual had occurred that day.

She turned her head at my approach and smiled. 'Oh, hello,' she said, 'I've been watching the clouds over Green Glade and must get up now and look for it, because we're having a picnic down in the valley and it's getting late. Soon they will start the singing and Fred says that the singing is nothing without me, and so I must hurry and find it and get back down there.' She looked into my eyes with startling intentness. 'I must find it,' she said, 'for it was so beautiful. It was made of the finest gold, and inside our initials were carved within the outlines of two clasped hands.' Her eyes were large and dark, brighter now than ever. Then suddenly they clouded over and she lifted her hand from her lap to cover her mouth, which had in an instant drawn down into harsh lines of sorrow. The wind whipped at her skirt where it flounced on the ground about her legs. 'Oh Fred . . . I must find it, mustn't I, before you come?'

I had never had so sharp a sense of human misery, or so deep a sense of the dreadful ways in which the pride we link with our moralities can torture us. And as I looked at Anna, the pain I felt for her became identical with my own earlier pain. I knew then that I had never loved any other girl than the girl in the city, and that I did not now, and that it was only stubborn folly that had kept me from writing her, from begging her to try to love me again. In a moment, there in the spring wind, her image came back to me as clearly as it really was, the serious, intelligent eyes, the wounded mouth, her slim brown body in a white dress. I would write her at once, go back at once. Life was too short. . . . The winter had taught me only that frayed untruth, and I did not learn more until a moment later. Life is indeed too short, but we are helpless to change it, as the adage implies.

I looked at Anna Brettly. My throat was thick with sorrow for her, and with longing. 'May I help you?'

She looked at me again and nodded. She took her hand away from her lips and said, 'Yes, help me if you will, for soon they will start the singing, and I must really be back there, then . . .'

We came to our knees together and began the futile search.

I knew, once I knelt, that I was not really helping her. I was helping myself. We pick over the dead ground of our past searching for those lost pieces of it which will make enduring our failure and our loss. But even as we hunt among the fragments and the shards, thinking that a latter-day reconstruction can somehow duplicate a spontaneous pleasure or a passion, we know that we will not find the missing piece. Searching the ground for a mad woman's ring that was not there, I was anticipating the certain failure of a letter which I had not yet written but would surely write.

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## 6

### *Where Nothing Ever Happens*

**T**HAT YEAR IN GREEN GLADE was a lonely one. When I was young the annual visit to my Aunt Selina was the great event in each year, and in those days I was one with the boys in the village, but in the ten years that we had been apart, they had changed and I had changed, and whatever it was that we had had in common as children had been lost somewhere in the years between. In that autumn when I came back again I was almost always alone. In the daytime I could go off for a tramp in the marshes or into the hills, and in the evening I could play rummy with my aunt, but she went to bed at an early hour and at nine or ten I'd find myself alone again. Then I sometimes walked down through town and across the bridge in the hope that I'd find someone fishing there.

That's how I happened to be on the bridge when the Anderson boy was drowned. It was later than usual, almost eleven, and a very dark night without moon or stars. I walked as far as the draw and stopped there to talk to Nick Green and one of the Langer boys, and I remember that one of them said they'd been fishing for an hour without a strike. It wasn't very long after I'd stopped that a boat came through under the bridge, drifting. We heard it scrape against one of the piers and then it came through just below us. There were two men in it and Nick yelled at them to look out for the lines. They looked up and in the light from the bridge we saw their faces. One was a village loafer named Barney

Boles and the other was the oldest Anderson boy. The boat drifted on ten or twelve feet and then we couldn't see it any more, the river and the night were so dark.

Everything was so quiet that we could hear a whippoorwill call in the marsh as clearly as if it had been there on the draw. Then there was a splash a good distance below the bridge, and more splashing, and we knew what was happening. We waited, tense, and in a moment the calling broke out, cries for help muffled by lungs already filled with water. Then silence for a moment, and again the cries, already growing faint, as if the current had in that short time carried the victim a good way down the river. Suddenly everything was quiet again.

'Come on, Nick, let's go,' the Langer boy cried, and they wound up their reels and in a second were running to the end of the bridge. I heard them yell to someone in the street and in only a moment five or six people were running out on to the bridge and lanterns were bobbing up and down along the shore. In half an hour the bridge was crowded with half-dressed villagers, the shore was lit up by flares, and the dredging had begun. Boles had reached the shore, but the Anderson boy had not. Everybody was asking everyone else questions, and presently a half dozen different versions of the story were in circulation. Someone said that he'd seen Boles buy a pint of whiskey earlier in the evening, and someone else said that he'd heard him ask John Anderson to come along for a drink. A third voice said, 'They was drunk, all right, else that boat'd never've tipped. You can't tell me different.'

'I'll sue him,' said a voice. Everyone turned to look. It was John Anderson's father who had spoken. No one had noticed him. He stood with his elbows resting on the railing and his chin in his hands, untroubled eyes trained on the dredgers down the river. He was a middle-aged man, thick-set, with short, bowed legs and a heavy, stupid face. 'I'll

sue him for this,' he said again, and then, turning to the people behind him, asked quickly, 'Where is Boles?'

'In the lock-up,' someone volunteered.

The man's little eyes shifted back and forth across the faces before him, and he said, 'He can't get away with this,' and he pushed his way roughly through the crowd and started to walk back to town.

For a moment no one said anything, until a woman whispered in an awed tone, 'He's not very worried about the boy.'

Someone else said, 'He's got nine other kids all younger than this one to worry about.'

And still another, with a rumble of laughter, 'Well, I want to see the day when he gets anything out of Barney Boles.'

An old man turned away from the railing and said in a high, whining voice, 'We-ell, someone's been drowned in this river every year now as far back as I can remember. Yes, sir, every year, and I've lived in this town for a right long time.'

A man at my elbow said, 'Well, they might as well stop for tonight. That boy's a goner!' and a woman's high voice abruptly cried, 'Oh, it's a pity! He was so young.'

In the two days that the search for the body went on, no one thought much of Mrs. Anderson. Her turn was to come later. Now the men were busy with the dredging, more and more of them volunteering as the fruitless hours passed, and the women, their memories freshened by this death, talked of all the drownings that they were able to remember, and all that they had heard of. But no one thought much of the family except to repeat now and then the fact that there were ten children.

The Andersons lived in a small house on the edge of town, near the railroad tracks. The father was an independent carpenter with infrequent calls for his labor. They were very poor, and you often saw the children with their ragged clothes and dirty faces, thin and uncared for, playing along the tracks or loitering around the depot. You saw Mrs. Anderson on the

main street sometimes doing the marketing for the family, sickly, pale and lined, and stooped in the shoulders. In the two days that the search for the body went on, I thought occasionally of her, and how she spent the hours between, and of her children, too, whether their voices had been stilled for a few hours by what must seem awesome. Then on the morning of the third day, some boys found the body washed up on a sand bar far down the river where they had come to fish.

My Aunt Selina said that we would have to call on the Andersons. I protested, but she was firm. 'You don't know them very well, that's true,' she said. 'But neither do I. And it is proper here for everyone to offer their sympathies in case of death, and in this case particularly because it is somewhat out of the ordinary. You must come with me.'

That seemed to end the matter and we went. We saw as we approached the house that on the outside, at any rate, death had not changed much. The scrap of lawn was still overrun with weeds, the grass stood knee-high, the sidewalk was covered with dirt and pebbles and fallen twigs, and in the weeds stood a battered coaster and a tin pail and a rusty old tricycle without a seat. On the dusty porch three children sat heaping up piles of sand over which they poured water from a bucket. When we turned in they looked up and stared at us. My aunt knocked firmly on the door, looking as she did so at the faded crêpe that fluttered before us in the autumn breeze.

We heard feet shuffling toward the door and in a moment Mrs. Anderson appeared in a soiled gingham dress and house slippers worn through at the toes. She stared at us and at last said, 'Hello. Come in, please.'

We were taken into the dining room and seated on a frayed sofa. It was a sad-looking room with loose paper hanging from the ceiling, furniture battered and scarred, and gray curtains hanging limply before streaked windows.

My aunt looked away from her when she said, 'We came to tell you how sad we are about the accident.'

Mrs. Anderson looked at my aunt without saying anything. Her eyes were like dull stones in her face. She nodded her head vaguely once or twice in unfelt gratitude. There was something about her that made me uncomfortable. It may have been the way she sat slumped in a rocking chair, her hands hanging loosely over the arms, her eyes watching us with an obscure chagrin, and utterly uncommunicative. Presently she got to her feet and walked to the double doors that opened on the next room. She pushed them apart and we could see the parlor. The room had a newness about it that the room in which we sat did not have. There the shades were half drawn, and the sun filtered through yellowed lace curtains under the shades and cast a mottled pattern on the floor and on the walls and on the closed gray coffin that stood in the center of the room.

The woman slouched back to her chair and sat down. Her eyes looked out through the curtains and the dirty windows and seemed to rest on the cinder banks on either side of the railroad tracks at the edge of the yard. Still looking out, she spoke in her flat, characterless voice, 'We can't show the body. He was in no shape any more when they found him.'

I heard my aunt's sharp intake of breath, and I thought suddenly of the wailing voice of that woman on the bridge when she cried, 'He was so young . . .'

A long silence was awkwardly broken at last when my aunt began to talk about the weather.

In a few moments two children, both a few years older than the oldest of those we had seen on the porch, came into the room from the kitchen and stood like scarecrows in the door, staring. The mother looked at them wearily, but did not stir. 'Stay outside,' she said in her flat voice.

The girl whined, 'We don't want to stay out there all day, do we, Orvy?'

Orvy wiped his nose on his sleeve, sniffled, and shook his head.

The mother sighed. 'Well, sit down and be quiet then.'

But the girl giggled and walked to her mother and whispered something in her ear.

'No,' said the mother.

'Please,' she whined, 'can we, please, ma?'

'No.'

'Oh, ma, just for a minute,' and without waiting for another answer, the girl signaled to her brother and they went into the parlor. We could see them standing by the coffin, looking down at it.

'Come away from there,' the mother said.

There was no answer. The boy and girl stood staring at the coffin, stood for the moment unmoving and dumb with wonder. The mother's lips began to twitch and she turned her eyes away from them, and then, looking glumly at my aunt, said, 'Children are a trial.'

My aunt said something about the burdens of the Lord, but I did not hear it all, for I was watching the children in the parlor. They had lost interest in the coffin and had turned to a table near the window on which I could see boxes and china and albums and souvenirs. The girl bent eagerly over the contents of a plush-covered box, and the boy, kneeling on the rug, kept turning over and over in his hands a brown china pig with gold lettering stamped on its sides. The girl picked up a black leather album with a big gilt clasp and, coming to her knees beside her brother, put it on the floor before them. They bent over it and turned the stiff pages. Now and then a giggle came from the girl. A breeze suddenly blew the curtains into the room, and the pattern of the sun shifted crazily on the coffin and then grew fixed again.

My aunt said something about baking coffee-cake that evening. 'I'll send some over,' she said.

Mrs. Anderson began to rock slowly back and forth in her

chair. 'Thanks,' she said. 'I haven't had time to do a thing since all this happened.'

'I know, I know,' my aunt said softly.

'There's always so much work I don't know where to begin with it.'

'Yes . . . yes . . . that's right.'

'And then sometimes I think what's the use anyway? Just as soon as you get the place looking clean somebody comes walking through with muddy feet or the train goes by and everything's covered with soot again.'

'Ah, it's hard, it's hard,' my aunt said.

'Lord, how many years since I saw an end to work and trouble!'

No one spoke, and for a moment there seemed to be an echo of her words in the room, but then that ceased too. We sat like three figures in a trance, staring at the walls, lost suddenly to life in the squalid, silent room.

A shriek of glee came from the parlor and was followed at once by a long, suppressed giggle. The girl and boy, still on their knees before the album, looked sheepishly over their shoulders at their mother and at us.

The mother only said, 'What's wrong now? Come out of there, you two!'

They stood up and the girl led the way out of the parlor, carrying the album open in her hands. She came to her mother's chair and laid the album in her lap. 'Lookit, ma, that's you, ain't it?' she cried, and pointed at the open page with a dirty finger. 'Lookit the hat you got on, ma, and the sleeves on the dress!'

The mother's dumb eyes dropped to the page and stared. There was no sign of emotion in her face until presently her mouth began again its nervous twitching. The girl leaned over her shoulder and stared at the picture. The boy had wandered back into the parlor. He was sitting on the floor by the table again, turning and turning again in his hands the brown china pig.

The girl stood straight and looked at her mother's bent head. Her coarse graying hair fell in lanky strands around her face as she leaned over the picture. In her thin neck, tendons stretched taut under gray skin. The girl said, 'Gee, ma, you was purty,' and she stood a few steps away staring at her mother's bent head, trying to bring together in her mind the woman in the picture and the woman in the chair.

The mother looked up. Her eyes were as dead as ever, and her voice as dead when she said, 'That was long ago.' She handed the album over to my aunt. We looked at the picture.

The picture was of a young woman, hardly more than a girl, who wore on her head an enormous hat with black plumes sweeping in a curve to her cheek. She had an attractive mouth that smiled faintly, and proud breasts and shoulders under a lacy ruff and great sleeves. But only the eyes were extraordinary — large, dark, questioning, with a look that showed how little they had met and how much they expected.

I saw my aunt's hand tremble on the page that held the picture, and I heard my own suddenly sharp breath. For we were both looking into the incredible bloom of the woman's youth.

My aunt handed the album back to the mother, and the mother without looking at it again gave it back to the child. 'Put it away,' she said, 'and get Orvy out of that room.'

We were looking at her as she sat slouched in the wooden rocker, and like the girl, we were trying to bring together these two women, the one in the picture and the real one before us. Her hands, thin and scarred, were gripped together in her lap, and her eyes stared at the ceiling. I looked at her feet and saw the holes in the front of the old felt slippers she wore. She twisted her hands together in her lap, and I heard the dry sound they made. She said, 'That was so long ago, I can hardly remember it.'

The girl and boy came out of the parlor now, walking slowly by the coffin and staring at it with the same curiosity, and stood by their mother's chair, but she did not notice them now. Her eyes had a sudden glint in them and the harsh lines around her mouth seemed momentarily softened. 'I guess I was only about eighteen then . . .' she was saying in a soft monotone, and my aunt and I leaned forward a trifle, feeling that this was the moment in which something was going to happen, in which the hard walls of bitterness which the woman's life had built around her were at last to be broken down, and she would find in her heart some grief, and in that some relief from the poverty of her life. Even the children seemed to feel this, even the little boy, who, for the first time, stood quietly by his sister, waiting for something to happen.

From the kitchen or beyond it then came the harsh cries of a child petulantly wailing. It broke in on the stillness of the room and upon the tenseness of our waiting, but it went on for several minutes before the mother seemed to grow aware of it. Then she sat up suddenly, and as she leaned forward and called sharply, angrily at the closed kitchen door, 'Nellie! Nellie!' her eyes had the dull look of stones again and her lips began to twitch.

A girl of fifteen or less appeared in the kitchen door. She brushed yellow hair out of her thin face, and her pale eyes looked inquiringly at her mother.

The mother cried, 'I told you to keep that baby quiet. Get out there on the porch and tend to him!'

The kitchen door closed behind the girl and in a moment the child's crying ceased.

My aunt and I stood up. 'Well, we better get along now,' my aunt said, and in her voice I heard her eagerness to be away.

Mrs. Anderson shuffled to the door behind us. 'Good-bye,' my aunt said.

‘Good-bye,’ said the woman from the other side of the screen. ‘It was nice of both of you to come.’

We went down the steps and started up the sidewalk. All the way home my aunt kept saying, ‘The poor woman, the poor, poor woman,’ and even after we were in her house again, once at supper and again over the playing cards that night, she looked into my face and said, ‘My, that poor woman, that poor, poor thing!’

Half the village came to the funeral. Since the night of the drowning, everyone had been talking about how none of the Andersons seemed to mind much that the boy was dead. The neighbors would gather at back fences and say that something ought to be done about the children, running around and screaming in front of the house as if nothing at all had happened; and in the stores down-town, merchants and their customers would stare out of the window at the father as he walked down the street with his hands in his pockets and his hat on the back of his head and once, it was reported, whistling as he walked; and the old women would wag their heads and say they’d always known that Mrs. Anderson wasn’t much but they guessed she wasn’t even human, going on as she did without so much as shedding a tear for her own flesh and blood, and that her first-born, too.

So they all came to the funeral and there was a great hum of whispering in the church before the organ began to play. How could a mother be like that? The women would lean across each other, whispering, questioning, conjecturing, covering their mouths with their handkerchiefs, and lean back to fan their hot faces indignantly, or to clasp their hands in their laps in pious outrage.

Their voices stopped when the organist struck the first long chord of the familiar funeral march, and simultaneously all the heads in the church turned to watch the minister enter, pace down the aisle, and slowly mount the pulpit. All the unblinking eyes stared at the coffin as it was brought in by

the six young men who were the dead boy's best friends, and then all watched fixedly the family marching behind it, the father and the mother, walking apart, neither supporting the other as was usually necessary, and behind them the nine children, led by the oldest boy and the girl, Nellie, who carried a baby in her arms, with the three small children we had seen on the porch, behind them, and then the two who had brought out the album and in the rear one other whom I had not seen before. They filed into the front pew of the church and sat down together, and at that moment everyone seemed to relax a little.

The long service began and nothing happened. Everyone, my aunt and I, too, watched the family. We did not hear the minister as he preached over the gray coffin, and I don't think the family heard him. Their faces were like the faces of glum, uneasy statues, and nothing happened.

When at last it was over, the women looked at each other tight-lipped and uncomfortable in the presence of such grieflessness, and yet intent on staying to the end. We all followed the coffin and the mourners to the side of the church and stood with our heads bowed around the open grave. The minister began his prayer, and my aunt and I looked through the crowd at the face of the mother as it stared down unseeing at the coffin.

I listened to the prayer, followed it through its long course, and sensed at last that it was coming to an end. The minister was crying heavenward in a slow, rumbling voice: *'And God, if in Thy infinite wisdom and mercy Thou hast seen fit to take to Thy bosom this young life, we know that it is good; for what is life but long trouble and endless travail, what but a long dying before we come to Thee? And when, O God, can death come more beautifully than in youth, before the trouble and the travail have begun, and the bloom has not shriveled on its stem?'*

I looked at Mrs. Anderson, and knew that she too had heard the minister. My aunt beside me touched my hand,

and I knew that she too was leaning forward, waiting as I was waiting for something to happen. And I thought I saw in the woman's eyes that sudden gleam again and a softening about her mouth.

*'... and we have no reproach to make to Thee, Oh, God, but only gratitude for all that Thou hast spared him and all that Thou hast given....'*

Then from her moving lips came at last a long unearthly cry of anguish, a long wail that chilled with the misery it contained. Instantly every eye was turned to her, and into the faces of all the women streamed a quick and visible relief. Now they looked toward her with eyes that showed the kindness she had not let them feel before, and in another moment, as her weeping grew more violent, all the women in the churchyard were weeping with her.

*'... eternal youth and glory of Thy kingdom. Amen.'*

Mrs. Anderson's weeping did not stop. Her husband turned to look at her but his face did not change. Only one of the little girls began to cry bitterly and kept pulling at her mother's skirt. But the mother was oblivious to everything but her despair, and while the service came to an end and the coffin was slowly lowered into the earth, while the minister said his last words over the grave and let the ashes fall, she wept on, huddled together. Then the women hurried to her and threw their arms around her, and with each embrace she sobbed more loudly. Her husband stood awkwardly by, and the children grouped round him, the older sons embarrassed, the girls and smaller boys surprised and wondering. The women led Mrs. Anderson away among them, and took her into the church, and my aunt and I stood by the grave as the crowd slowly drifted apart and away and the sound of that strange hysteria died in the afternoon.

We walked away from the church. In my head I kept hearing the rumbling voice of the minister, pouring out his prayer. 'I'll never forget that picture in the album,' I said to my aunt,

'It's come back to me now, and I know that I'll never forget it.'

My aunt spoke slowly. 'I'll never forget that either, nor this funeral, nor all those foolish women,' she said.

When we got to my aunt's house we sat for a long time in her kitchen while the afternoon came to an end, and neither of us spoke, but we were both thinking of the thick wall that grief had broken through and how perhaps we were the only people in all that crowd who knew that even there at the grave the woman had not wept for her son.



# 7

## *To the Wind*

**A**T TWENTY-THREE, with a particular kind of education and experience, I did not know that the struggle with guilt is endless, and when I found myself embroiled in agonies of rationalization, the drama was short and factitious. If there is no other guilt, there is always the failure of imagination, which, among men, perhaps only Christ eluded.

At twenty-three, without any of the reasons one may legitimately have at fifty, I felt that childhood was the best time in life, and with empty, griefless eyes, I would look nostalgically back on my childhood as I imagined it. Only then, I thought, were you really free, without burdens; and thinking so, I would lapse into a reverie in which the world wavered into unreality and I found myself vividly reliving some trivial episode of my youth. Then I would feel that I was not merely remembering the past as something remote and vague, but actually living it, living through it as fully as the child had lived himself. Mistaking sentiment for sensuousness, I thought that I went through the past like a boy across a meadow in the sun, feeling the grass under the bare soles of his feet, the moist earth, the warm sun on his head, and in his heart the unknown song that we pretend a child forever sings.

I was remembering such a meadow when Jared Smith came to my office for the third time. A creek ran through the meadow, winding and turning, clear water running between steep banks of black earth, with shallow places where you

could build a dam. I remembered a day when I followed this creek to its mouth at the river, wandering all of an afternoon along its banks in the long grass of the meadow, the earth moist and the sun warm.

Then Smith came in again, looking more grave than before. I didn't take him seriously. Too much of this sort of thing went on all of the time, and you came to expect it. Only most students were less persistent than Smith. This was the third time he had come about it, and I had grown increasingly impatient with him, so that now his state of near-hysteria did not move me. And if it had, there would still have been the fact that I could do nothing about it. His grades showed a certain average and I had turned that in for him; now the semester was over and the matter closed. Smith thought that if he could only make me see how important the thing was to him it would be easy enough for me to call someone up and say, 'I've made an error. Jared Smith should have had a B instead of a C.'

For the third time I tried to show him that this was impossible and I went over all his grades again, and all he kept saying was, 'I see that, sir; I'm sure a C is exactly what I earned; but don't *you* see ——'

Then he launched out into the whole tale again: he was a swimmer and he had given up swimming in order to put more time on his work; he broke with his fraternity in the middle of the term because it took up too much of the time that he wanted to give to his studies; he had sacrificed everything to studying and he had done well in everything except my course, but the C I gave him was enough to keep him out of the honorary society which was the only evidence he would ever have for his achievement.

'In high school they always thought I was stupid and I wanted to show them; I've got to have the grade because I've *got* to show them. You see, sir, they always thought I didn't have a brain at all, and now I've got to, I've *simply got to* ——'

For the first time I began to see what an intense person he was, and at another time it might have surprised me, for I had come to think of him as a rather stolid youth. But now I was frankly bored. You read fifty or a hundred freshmen themes every week for nine months in the year and you soon find yourself without much interest in any one of your students; and you don't pay much attention to any individual's writing unless the student comes to you and takes it up with you himself. Smith had never asked for a conference, or even for any kind of casual assistance. Now I had gone over the whole matter three times and had tried each time to keep my patience, told him that I did think he was a high B student but that his writing simply didn't show it, that since the middle of the term it had been down to C and less almost consistently. Each time I said, 'If you'd come to me before, we could have gone over your themes and perhaps straightened out your difficulty, but it's too late now to do anything about it except get the B next term. If you like, I'll see to it that you get another instructor, that is, if you think you'd do better with someone else ——'

Against this he protested. 'I know you've been fair with me, sir, but that isn't the point. The point is that you won't see now how important it is that I get a B. It means more than anything ever has, I've simply got to get it ——'

I said again that he overemphasized grades, but that even if I agreed that making the honorary society was so important, I couldn't help him.

Finally he seemed to get the point. He looked at me steadily and then suddenly all the tenseness went from his body and he slumped down in the chair by my desk. He sat there for some minutes, completely dejected, staring at the floor, and at last got up and said, 'All right. I'm sorry I bothered you. Thank you,' and went out.

I haven't described him at all or tried to put down much about him beyond the facts of that last interview, because

after he went out of my office that day, I never saw him again. And from this point on, the story is not Smith's but mine.

Late in the next afternoon a boy whom I had never seen before came rushing into my office. 'You know Jared Smith?' he cried, and I, knowing somehow at once what had happened, feeling everything inside me contract in a spasm of faintness, said, 'Yes, of course. Why?'

The boy stood with his mouth open, panting. 'Sit down,' I said.

At last it came. 'His mother sent me. He committed suicide this afternoon. It's going to be in the papers — your name too. She asked me to say that the story didn't come from her and that she doesn't hold you responsible in any way.'

I took hold of the edge of my desk and forced myself to say what seemed to be the most important thing at that moment, 'Of course, I can't feel responsible.'

A look of pain crossed the boy's blond face. He was quite young and very distressed. He said, 'It's awful. It's too awful to think about!'

'Lord, yes!' I said. 'You knew him well?'

He nodded.

'How did he do it?'

'Gas. There wasn't anyone at home. His mother was down-town at the movies. She came home and found him on the kitchen floor.'

'Lord!'

I walked over to the window, looked down at the campus, and thought of the boy's body stretched out dead on a kitchen floor and gas still hissing from the stove. I felt myself struggling against something, I didn't know what or why, and wanted to turn round and tell his friend that I wasn't to blame, that nothing in the whole business could touch me.

I did turn round, but I spoke quietly. 'I'm terribly sorry. The whole thing is dreadful and please tell his mother that I can't say how sorry I am. But of course I'm *not* responsible. Any teacher is likely to have this sort of thing happen. Sometimes you can't possibly tell which students are hypersensitive, which hysterical ——'

The look in the boy's face made me see that I was trying to defend myself (and before he spoke I asked myself, 'Against what?'), and then he said, 'He wasn't hysterical. I think you might have seen that he was sensitive.' Scorn came into his eyes before he added, 'But no one thinks you're to blame,' and turned away from me.

Yet, when he looked back, his face was only sorrowful, his eyes bleached with loss, and when he got up to leave he offered me his hand. I thought for a second that I was going to lose my hold on the situation. Some gagged voice inside me was trying to protest that I didn't deserve this and that I couldn't be blamed. I thought that in the next moment I should be blubbing out that protest, and yet, when I took the boy's hand something else made me cold, almost rude. I said, 'Thanks for coming. It was good of Mrs. Smith to send you. I don't mind the papers' running the story, because of course no one would blame me. Tell his mother how sorry I am. If she'd care to see me, I'd like very much to call.' We looked at each other. His eyes were cold again, chilled by my voice.

'Good-bye,' he said, and fled out as he had come, half-stumbling.

When you are young, I would keep thinking, remembering, you are free. I would think in the next three days (at night especially, and always remembering), when you are young you don't have to face such things, and that is the best time. Waking in the night suddenly, feeling the presence of that boy in the room, in the shadows, somewhere in the hiding dark, I would remember such an incident as this:

*I am quite young — six or seven — and after supper one evening (it is summer; in the marshes along the river the frogs are setting up their monotonous croaking, soothing, comforting, a steady sound in the night that stabilizes the dark and makes it a friend) I leave the family assembled at table and go into a little-used parlor. I must be very tired — from a day of running in the bright, protecting sun — for I lie down on a sofa in the dark of the parlor (and this I seem never to have done before), and in the sleep that follows I hear voices and confusion and I have the feeling that there are many people somewhere near; but the voices are like the comforting croaking of the frogs, and I do not wake for a time, until abruptly I am snatched out of sleep and I find myself in my father's arms, and then in my mother's (and she is weeping with relief) and I see the faces of my brother and sister, looking at me with something like awe. Then slowly I awake, I see more people in the room, and I know that outside the house half the town is assembled. Then, from a mixed report from the whole family (breathless, broken, excited, relieved, all of it mingled with weeping and laughing, with kisses and quick embraces) I gather that I have been lost, that the whole town has been aroused, that for the two hours I have been asleep in the little-used parlor, where no one thought to look beyond a desperate glance into the dark, the search has been going on. Then all of us go out on the front porch and I am shown and the whole thing delights me. My mother still weeps beside me, remembering her fright in the midst of her happiness and gratitude.*

This was no new memory, suddenly recollected. It was part of a childhood that I lived with constantly, always there, always somehow adequate, where the memory of lying in a sun-bright meadow with the steady drone of bees in clover in my ears was enough to soften any blow. And so now again in those three days, those three nights especially, I found myself going back, not searching and yet remembering. In bed, with the ghost of that boy somewhere in the room, powerful against me, I remembered this:

*Another summer day, late in the afternoon, and I am walking with an aunt to the cemetery a mile out of the village. On the way we pass a field of buckwheat, and my aunt stops in the path for a moment. 'Buckwheat,' she says, her arm lifted, and moves on, the flower-filled basket on her arm swinging a little as she walks, bumping now and again against her hip. At the cemetery we attend to the graves of relatives, snipping grass with the shears from the basket, pulling up weeds, arranging flowers under white headstones pink in the low summer sun, and when we start back to the village it is almost dusk. The air is very quiet now and cooler, the dust of the day settled. Once more we pass the buckwheat field and now, with a start, both of us smell in the air an incredible sweetness. We stop again and breathe the perfume of the buckwheat, stand still for perhaps five minutes — and then move on toward the village, marked in the dusk by a dozen yellow-lighted windows, friendly, home.*

But now, in the three dark nights, these memories were not strong. In the struggle that went on between the part of my brain that brought them up and the part that knew the boy was in the room, a thin ghost, pale, unhappy, accusing, the memories lost, until, on the third night, I found myself abruptly awake, sitting erect in my bed, perspiring, a scream that must have been mine echoing in my ears. In my fright I knew that I was helpless, that there was no escape from it, nothing with which to fight against it. Then my fear (and what was I fearing?) ebbed away, and I lay down again in the darkness and thought that now the boy was buried and that on the next day I would call on his mother. I would return the packet of his themes — the themes I had not dared to read again for fear that now I should see in them a whole cycle of hysteria that I had missed before, perhaps from careless reading — and then I would be done with the whole thing.

I fell asleep again. And next morning my childhood seemed far away. Now I remembered winter nights before the fire and the quiet sound of my father's voice reading

aloud, but I *remembered* them only, as one remembers an image or a picture, not as something one is actually in. I remembered a pool where you fished for small perch, and a path leading up over a birch-covered hill and down to a strip of sandy beach by the river. But in these memories there was the threat of the end of something.

It was afternoon and time to go to the mother. Twice I had taken the rubber band from the packet of themes, twice brought myself to the point of reading them, but now, having decided, I stood by my desk and snapped the band firmly on the papers. I thought that if I read them and found nothing there — I remembered a theme called 'War' (Jared Smith had been a pacifist) and another called 'My Religious Views' — then I should be free and certain. But if I did find something there, some growing hysteria, some increasing despair (what *had* he said in the theme called 'My Religious Views'?) then I might never be free. And I decided that I would rather be uncertain and slowly forget than know, and perhaps never be able to forget.

The mother let me into the apartment herself. She was a large woman, heavy and strong-looking, standing before me in the dark hall a great hulk of strength. I told her who I was and she said, 'Oh-h-h,' with a kind of long sigh, and then, 'Please come in.'

The room was all shadows and the windows were full of the gray beginning of the winter evening. The woman pulled a chair out of a corner and said, 'Please sit down.' Then she lit a lamp so that the light fell on me, and she stood over me, looking down, and said finally, 'I didn't think of you as such a young man. I thought of you as somehow older. From Jared's accounts I thought that you'd been teaching for a long time. He felt at the end that you were treating him perfunctorily, as if every student were just another student and not a human being to you — any longer. But that could be

true of the very young as well as of the older, couldn't it?'

She smiled and sat down across from me, her eyes quizzical and interested. It was almost as if I had come to have tea with her, as if in a moment we would begin to talk about literature. Her composure as she sat there made me feel my weakness.

I said, 'Try to understand. We meet perhaps a hundred students a week, and we read a hundred themes, and it's difficult to do much with them individually. Especially if they don't come to you. He never did. I hardly knew him.'

She leaned forward, concerned and apologetic. 'Oh, I do understand that — quite! I didn't mean —'

'No, of course not. It was good of you to send the other boy to tell me. It would have been a blow if I'd just read about it in the papers or heard about it suddenly without some warning.'

'Yes,' she said. 'I knew that.'

'I've brought his themes. I thought you'd like to keep them. I can't tell you how upset I am about this.'

'But, child,' she said, smiling again. 'I know you're not to blame. I know you couldn't have done anything about that grade. I told Jared so —'

'It isn't the grade,' I said. 'It's not having known him. It's not having seen in him the possibilities of the kind of hysteria that must have been behind his act. I should have seen that — if it was there. I certainly didn't. And now I don't know if it was there or not. I haven't had the courage to read his themes again, fearing that it might be. . . . Here they are.' I leaned forward and gave them to her. She put them in her lap and folded her hands over them. I could see how calm she was by the steady rise and fall of her bosom, by the quiet hands in her lap.

Outside it had begun to snow very lightly. Through the window and the thin veil of snow I could see across a gray field to a bare tree standing beside a wooden fence, its empty

branches reaching up into the dreary sky. I felt myself wavering away from the room and the woman across from me, to another tree in another place, an elm heavily laden with leaves, with great strong branches, with white clouds and a blue sky above it, and high in the tree somewhere, a platform with a boy lying on his stomach, reading, lost in the pages of a book, in the fabulous blue of the sky, in the almost mythical intricacies of branch and green, green leaf.

But the woman's voice wove itself into the myth (for now I knew that it was a myth, a dream of bliss that had never been, that could certainly never be again) and drew me from the imagined tree to the real tree and the dreary landscape outside, to the shadowy room, and to her hands, symbols of her quiet. She was saying, '... and of course, you must not let this disturb you, it might have happened to anyone. It was the merest chance that it happened to you. I hope that you will be able to see it that way. ...'

'Yes, it might have happened to anyone else. But someone else might have seen what I failed to see, might have thought of Jared Smith as a person who was living too, who was alive, not just a hand that wrote themes, but a human being, with desires and a life to live. ...'

*(The green of the tree, the fabulous strength of its branches, and the lost boy lost in the legend!)*

... with a home to go to and a childhood to remember, with burdens to bear (he bore them!) and a manhood to come to (he came to it!) ... for if Jared Smith had ever had a childhood, he had put it behind him. He knew that it was no dream that he would meet in the hissing gas; he knew that in breathing in those fumes he was not losing himself in an impossible bliss but was taking on his burden and coming into his manhood.

The quiet voice again, '... always unstable, really, highly-strung, neurotic, I suppose, taking his disappointments terribly hard ... no sense of proportion at all. ... It was something I always feared. ...'

Outside, the barren tree was lost in the winter evening. I got up. 'I must go. It's late.'

The mother rose with me. She put the packet of themes on a table and walked into the hall with me. I struggled into my coat. Then she put out her hand. 'Thank you for coming.'

I took her hand. It was cold. I said, 'You're wonderful. Your composure —'

I felt her hand tighten in mine. She struggled to speak, and then, in a sudden, fearful sob, her voice was drowned in grief. Her whole body shook in a spasm of weeping as she sat abruptly on a little bench in the hall, weeping violently, sobs torn from her body with a fearful violence. She clamped her hands together between her knees and, swaying back and forth on the bench, spoke between her sobs, 'Oh-h-h,' (the long sigh tragic now) 'I loved him, I loved him . . . you don't know, you don't *know* . . . there have been terrible moments . . . *you don't know!*'

The weeping of a frail, small woman I could have borne. But the racking violence of the grief in this woman, large and strong, as she sat rocking back and forth in the gloom, was more than I could bear. For a moment I had an impulse to share her grief, in the same violent sobbing to relieve myself in exhausting tears. But the second impulse was to flee, to leave her behind, to avoid the confession that tears from me would mean.

I opened the door and went out. In the street I ran through the snow and kept my head up, so that the wind could strike my face.

I ran blindly through the streets in no direction at all, and ran until my feet dragged, and yet would not stop. I pressed my eyes shut against the wind and went stumbling through drifts of snow that the sharpening wind was piling across the sidewalks. It was cold and the wind was biting, but I did not feel it. At last I came to a church, and saw it towering up

into the sky, blacker than the night. I stood looking up at its great doorway and its steeple, and without thought I climbed its steps and sat down in the wide stone doorway, out of the wind. I had never been in the church, but out of some remote time I remembered nuns moving quietly across an altar, lighting tall candles, suffusing the white, glistening altar with a luminous warmth, giving to the stone images of pedestaled saints a soft, deceptive life. I had never knelt in a church, but now I thought that if I went in and knelt on a rail worn into grooves with many kneelings, if I could bury my head in my arms and empty my ears of the sound of weeping, I should find a penitent's peace. Then I began to say, 'I am not to blame, God, I am *not*, I am *not* . . .' but no such peace came, and I wondered what I should do with this blame which was not mine but which I could not lose.

I thought of the confessional inside, at one side of the altar. If I could go in there and confess, and be forgiven, then I should be free again. *Confess! Confess!* something cried, some voice from the lost years, from the fabulous tree, from the fires on winter nights, some voice that came like the wind, sweeping across the sunny meadows, rippling the water of a child's dammed creek, *Confess!*

If I could confess, pour out my sins, empty myself of this pain . . . if I could!

*Confess! Confess!* the voice whistled, blowing through the branches of the unknown, the mythical tree, driving great billows of white cloud over a dream-blue sky.

But what? Confess what?

The voice answered (sadly now, sighing through the branches), *Confess . . . confess . . .*

But what? what?

Then, like an echo, weakly, from afar: *Confess . . .*

Yes, yes, but *what?*

And then the voice did not answer (*Oh, now the branches of the tree are bare and still, no longer the voice like the wind in*

*the marvelous tree!*) and the silence tore me from that dream. I sat in the doorway, straining forward to hear an answer. But there was none and, suddenly ashamed and sobered, I leaned back against the door.

Something was ending. The desire to confess was but imagining that tree with its wonderful foliage that had never been. But the tree was dead, its branches bare, and all the lost years were dead, and the voice from the years was dead with them.

Then something had ended.

I went down the steps. The wind, sharper now than ever, came with a blast up the street, sweeping the snow before it. I stood in the empty street and let it blow at me and through me, blow the ashes of the years away into the dark sky.

Then I started back through the cold night, shivering, and resolved to go back to the woman's house. Something had ended, and I could go back to her and say that the blame was mine and that I took it, that, like her son, I had found a place to lay the burden.

The wind blew strong, scattering the years across the sky.

I went back. But nothing ends. We do not grow this way, in moments. And these moments, when self-righteousness hardens, are really the most treacherous of all. Then we exchange one naïveté for another, one dream for another dream. I had achieved the new shutters of a half-apprehended experience, the blinkers of an unreal moral courage.

Yet how was I to know, then, that the years as I imagined them scattering across the sky were as unreal as Shelley's dead and gaudy leaves of good?

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## 8

### *They Were Not Kind*

I MET MARCIA AND MARY in the same week, and I thought from the first that they were as different as their names. After I left her that first afternoon, I remembered Marcia walking up the street with her long bold steps, swinging her arms at her side. I remembered her large mouth, atrociously red, and the way she laughed. Later that week, I kept contrasting her with Mary, remembering Mary as she sat across from me in her sitting room, her head always lowered a little, her gray eyes hurt and frightened. She was plain and timid, almost homely sometimes, but you only needed to see her eyes to know that she had suffered.

I came to know them. Marcia impressed me because she was bold. She laughed people down if they were too much for her, or looked at them with supreme contempt. If she was defeated in an argument, she burst out in her raucous laughter, and what she meant was, 'You really are the ass I thought you!' Or she would suddenly ignore the person with whom she had been talking, and that was even more disconcerting than the laughter. When I told her that I loved her, she looked at me queerly through her narrow eyes, and, after a moment's silence in which she seemed to debate the advisability of my love, she said, 'That's nice. I'm glad. You're sweet, Jerry.'

Mary invited me to tea one day and we talked about a lyric she had written, and then about what I did. All the time her head was lowered, her timid, frightened eyes shifted

from the floor to the pictures on the wall and to her hands in her lap, but they never looked directly at me. I thought it plain that she pitied herself, softly, mutely, but I was so positive that she had endured unusual pain that I felt her self-pity justified. And when she began to tell me bits out of her life, and from the fragments I could piece the whole sorrowful thing together, I pitied her, too. I wanted to take her in my arms and speak softly to her, and to give her some assurance. I felt like her protector. And besides, she gave me a very solemn kind of respect.

So I fell in love with them both and they began to occupy all my thoughts, all my time. I found it impossible to choose between Marcia, with her nearly brutal sexuality, and gentle, timid Mary, who made me feel that mine was brutal; but the more I saw of them, the more clearly I saw how completely different they were, and I knew that they must never meet.

But they did. I was walking with Marcia one day and at a corner we almost collided with Mary.

‘Oh! Hello, Jerome,’ she said, softly.

‘Hello, Mary. This is Marcia Carewe — Mary Landor.’

‘How do you do?’

‘How do you do?’

I stood by, watching them anxiously. They smiled and nodded, but their words were like chameleons; they hated each other already. Mary seemed to grow smaller and smaller before Marcia, the fright in her eyes increased and she looked plainer than ever before. Marcia laughed at something and drew herself up. They were saying things to each other, but I did not hear, for I was nervously wishing that they had not met, that one or the other would say good-bye. And just at that moment Mary did, said good-bye as she shot a furtive, fearful glance at me. Then she walked past us and hurried away.

Once more Marcia laughed boldly, the harsh laughter going in quick pursuit of Mary. We went on up the street. ‘Her hang-dog look irritates me,’ said Marcia.

'Her life hasn't been easy.'

'Tripe! Has mine? I'm every bit as sensitive as she is! Oh, of course you won't believe it, but I am! But I don't run around looking as though I'd just robbed a bank!'

'No, you don't,' I agreed.

Later she said, 'Arrogance, my dear. Arrogance is almost everything!'

I tried to show her how much Mary had suffered, but Marcia was not moved and would have none of it. She only laughed. Then I told her something that I had promised Mary I would never tell, I told it in a sort of desperate defense of her. And then, curiously enough, Marcia did not laugh.

When I met Mary again, she said, 'You like her, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'When I saw her I knew it, and I said, "Here is my enemy, a sensuous woman. This is attraction, this is what men want." And I hated her.'

'I know.'

'And she hates me.'

'Not hates, Mary . . .'

'What did she say?'

Now I must defend Marcia, as before I had defended Mary. 'You look as though you'd robbed a bank, she thought.'

'Oh, dear! Oh dear!' she cried, and stood there pitifully turning the ring on her finger. Then she went quickly across the room to a mirror and looked at her face. 'Yes — and — no!' she said.

Shortly after that I got two notes. I knew then that they had met again, this time without me, and I could imagine the meeting. Mary going to Marcia and, in her literary way, saying, 'You have shown me myself, and I love you for it. Yes! But I didn't look as though I had robbed a bank! No! I looked as though a bank had been taken from me! Nevertheless, you have shown me, and I am no longer like that.'

You have made me happy — and free. Look at my eyes! I scorn the old me! I scorn the one with the fagots on her back! I scorn her!

And then Marcia suddenly more soft, more gentle than was like her, saying, 'My dear, you have suffered. I was wrong. You have suffered. Jerry told me about the man . . . the man you asked to . . .' and so on.

I knew from the notes that something like this must have happened. The one from Marcia said only this:

You have put me in a very ridiculous position by your gossip and I dislike ridiculous positions. We can't meet again. — M.

The other note, Mary's, said this:

You repeated what I told you in strictest confidence. Oh, Jerome, how could you? And how could I ever be honest and free with you again? I couldn't, Jerome. — Mary.

But the real blow came when I met them on the street one day, walking along arm in arm, chatting softly, walking by without seeing me. Only now Marcia walked with less defiance, and Mary's mouth was painted red and her free arm swung boldly at her side. I stood there looking after them, astounded and alone. I am still rather alone. They are great friends.

No, they were not kind to me.



# 9

## *To Make Life Seem Full*

### I

**T**HE AUTUMN DUSK drifted down the street and a few stars came out over the trees. All the harsh outlines of the day softened in the gray shadow-stuff of evening and the street became almost like another street in another place, all familiar ugliness turned into the strange unreality of evening. It was as if hard surfaces were decomposing into softest cloud.

Inside that happened too. Slowly the shadows settled over the room and took the hard finish from the furniture; turned the stiff lace curtains hanging primly before the windows into veils that seemed to move gently in unfelt wind. Evening ate into the hard texture of the rug, into its flowered pattern and its ugly colors until it seemed like a vague softness on the floor and nothing real. In the corners, where whatnots stood rigid, on whose shelves stiff objects perched rigidly, shadows seemed almost to swirl, and the hard shine of porcelain and metal scrubbed meticulously every day dissolved into faintest, softest glimmering. On the table between the sisters the silver tea service gleamed with faintest, softest light.

Their faces changed. The twilight seeped in from the street, softly touched them, slowly molded their stiff faces into haggard repose. They sat still in the bay window and stared out into the darkening street oblivious of each other as they felt their faces relaxing, softening. The nervous hands of Miss Hedwig went on stroking the white napkin on her knees, smoothing it out into a creaseless surface, but

she had forgotten tea and her sister, had forgotten that it was time to clear away the tea things and begin to think of supper. Her hands were narrow and long, with thin, bony fingers and long, pointed nails slightly colored. She sat with her head bent forward, her neck no less thin, no less scrawny for the velvet band that circled it. Her thin lips tightly, almost intensely closed, seemed no fuller for the touch of rouge that defined them. The wrinkles in her face, deep and hard, were not softened by the powder dusted over them but by the gray light of the room, yet her face looked no less haggard, no less old for that softening as she sat leaning forward in the dim light, her precision of carriage and gesture gone as she smoothed the napkin on her lap with thin hands whose motion she had forgotten, as she had, for the moment, forgotten her sister beside her.

And Miss Amelia had forgotten Miss Hedwig, too. Her plump body drooped listlessly in her chair, and as she stared at the blurring light of the windows, her mouth hung open a little and her breath sounded gently in the room. The dusk wrapped her in its softness, reduced her face to a pasty blur of whiteness. She sighed.

Miss Hedwig raised her head and looked at her sister. Without looking up, Miss Amelia began to speak, and then the twilight was in her speech, too, softening it, putting some unfamiliar vagueness there as she said, 'Every night the twilight comes like this.'

'Why not, Amelia, why not?' Miss Hedwig asked.

Then the dusk was within them, the softness around their hearts suddenly, eating at their hearts suddenly like a corrosive, uncovering there reticences long buried and rigidly habituated.

'Every night it comes,' she said.

Miss Hedwig felt a little foolish. 'It would be more surprising if it didn't, Amelia,' said she, but without asperity.

'It makes us old,' Miss Amelia said. 'That's what.'

'Well . . .'

'Yes?'

'I suppose we are old, aren't we?'

'Fifty to sixty? Is that old?'

Then Miss Hedwig sighed. 'I don't know,' she said on a rush of breath.

'It's not age so much,' Miss Amelia said. 'It's that we've grown old without remembrances, with nothing to remember.'

'We have remembrances,' Miss Hedwig put in weakly.

But Miss Amelia seemed not to hear. 'Were we ever young?' she asked.

'Were we ever young!' It was a weak echo, no real remonstrance.

'Some people can live on remembrances. We can't even do that. I sit around trying to remember better things from the past, richer times than these ——' She paused, and then for the first time moved as she slapped one hand desperately down into the other on her lap. The sound was sharp in the room. Then she said, 'There *aren't* any, there never *were*.'

'Tut, tut, Amelia. There were and there still are. Why, even at that excursion last month, I enjoyed myself, was glad to be alive.'

'Enjoyed yourself! You didn't and neither did I. We've pretended so long that it's easy now. But enjoyment — no. Sitting around and watching other people's children playing. . . . You call that enjoyment?'

Miss Hedwig snorted a little. 'Come, come, Amelia, you can go too far with this. I never wanted children, never grieved for *that*, at least.'

Again, Miss Amelia, wrapped in her own dream in the dusk, did not hear, but spoke remotely, fleetingly out of the dream to no one: ' . . . one child fell and hurt his arm, and all the way home on the boat his mother held him in her lap, and I sat across from them and wanted nothing but to cry. It was dark on the lake, and I could just make out the blur of

his white blouse, and he whimpered . . . while his mother whispered to him, tried to soothe him. I felt terrible. I don't know why, but everything made me feel terrible . . . the waves lapping at the sides of the boat, the motor chugging, the little boy whimpering . . .' She paused. Then abruptly she remembered Miss Hedwig and what she had said. '*Enjoyed* it! Misery, that's what it was for me!'

Miss Hedwig squinted and looked narrowly at the shadowy form of her sister. She felt a vague unhappiness then, but again, weakly remonstrated: 'In our childhood — why, there were many happy occasions then, many things to remember. On winter mornings we would run down into the kitchen in our flannel nightgowns, with the wood in the stove just starting to burn, and thick, white streams of smoke curling out of the cracks on the stove top, and cook would dress us as we stood shivering on chairs. Our stockings were held up by circular bands of black elastic. Then there were picnics — school picnics, church picnics, all sorts, and once you got sick from too much lemonade and peanuts. Then there was the time when I fell in the mill race and almost drowned, and was saved by a branch hanging over the water, which I managed to cling to somehow. And we were the first girls in the village to have bicycles, called them wheels, then, and had special wheeling clothes. Why, there are a hundred things like that, all precious to remember. We had youth!'

'Precious! That's what's so bitter! Those things — they're all we have got. Trivial, trivial . . . nothing at all. And precious because there's nothing else!'

Miss Hedwig sat silent. There was a pause. She could hear her sister's breathing. Then she saw her raise her handkerchief to her nose and sniffle into it. The room was darker. They could hardly see each other. Vaguely the silver still gleamed, but now the faces of the sisters were dark.

'I'll light the lamps, Amelia. It's dark.'

Miss Amelia sniffled. 'Not yet,' she said. 'Wait.'

Miss Hedwig looked out through the windows at the scattered stars twinkling palely through the trees, until at last the street-light on the corner went on, and Miss Amelia's face was clearer to see again. But Miss Amelia did not seem to feel that the light fell on her, for she sat on, staring as if unseeing before her, her mouth still half opened.

Suddenly she spoke again. She said, 'No. Turn on no lights. I'm going to tell you something. I've never mentioned it to you. It has always shamed me. But not now. It was my chance. It would have given me something now. Listen ——'

## II

'You remember Burk Haydon? He was the town rake. Mother shuddered when his name was mentioned. To me he was rather repulsive. Except once. Oily and sleek, dark hair plastered down, a moustache. . . . You must remember him. He got some girl in trouble finally and disappeared. I never heard him mentioned since. But that was Burk Haydon — tall, always dressed too carefully, too jauntily and loudly for a man, with a flower in his buttonhole, and a kind of knowing sneer on his mouth. His mouth was heavy and cruel, his lips always wet. I have a clear remembrance of him though it is years now that he's gone. One night — I was about nineteen — I met him on a dark street. Quite suddenly. I was startled. He stopped and talked. We knew each other, of course, but we had never talked. I remember his voice, too. It was soft with something insinuating in it, something knowing. I shivered a little when he looked at me. As though he looked through all my clothes. I had felt that before, times when he just passed me on the street, looked at me for just a second. But on that night he stopped me, spoke to me, stared long. Then he asked if he could walk home with me. I said of course. He turned and walked by my side.

He held my arm as we walked. I felt his fingers on my arm. When we came to the park he stopped. He said that he wanted to talk to me, that I should come in the park with him and sit down for a while and talk. The park had its reputation then, just as it has now. I knew at once what he meant. I refused and started to walk on. Then he seized my arm. His fingers pressed it hard in their grip. He stopped me again and I saw his eyes and I heard him say then — and I know I wasn't dreaming — that I was beautiful. I was frightened. I think I laughed at him, from fright, though. But I knew how he lied. I was not beautiful. I was not even attractive. Neither of us ever was, Hedwig. I knew he lied. I knew what he wanted. For a moment longer he held me there with his eyes, and then, in the shadows, he seized me and for a moment held me tight in his arms, and then I screamed, so that he let me go, and I ran, and ran until I came home, and then had to sit outside on the back porch for a long time until I was calm enough to come into the house, and then for days I was not really calm, could not forget how there for a moment he held me tight in his arms and how I screamed. I was ashamed, and I could not forget.'

There was a pause. Miss Hedwig did not comment, made no movement. Miss Amelia looked at her hands in her lap. In the dim light from the street, her face was agitated, her full breast rising and falling with her agitation.

Then suddenly she looked at Miss Hedwig, her face tortured.

'I was a fool! Ashamed! I should have been proud! I was a woman then! Don't start. I mean it. If I had gone with him — well, I wouldn't be like this now. I'm sorry I didn't go. I'd have something now. You will say that *that* couldn't have made me happier. But I know that it could. You will say that it wasn't lovely. No. It was ugly. But an ugly thing, too, could be remembered.

'Yes, and I would have known that he didn't care for *me*,

that he would never have paid *me* another moment's thought. I would know it now, too. It would have been brutal, but even that would be enough for me now. The fact would remain. In this terrible twilight I could remember that fact. You will say that I wouldn't want to remember it. But I would. I know I would. It would have put me into life!

She paused. Her breathing was loud in the room. Then she went on, talking more quietly, more calmly.

But now Miss Hedwig was not hearing, was rising slowly from her chair, like a person arising in a dream, was gripping the arms of her chair, her napkin dropping unnoticed to the floor as she stood up thin and tall in the dark room, lost to the room, something triumphant in her figure, something strong and heedless and triumphant.

### III

Burk Haydon? Miss Hedwig thought with a start. Remember him! But why is she talking about him? She's never mentioned him before. Can she know? *Can she?* No — how she describes him, with what clear remembrance — the flower in his buttonhole — his mouth, heavy and cruel, the wet lips. How clear he is to her! As clear as he is to me. But what is she coming to? It isn't that she knows, she can't. For she describes him with tenderness, or fascination, or something like it, though she can hardly know that it's there in her voice. He met her on the street, at night — he stopped her and talked to her. His eyes pierced her clothes, saw her naked. I remember his eyes, remember how they burned, how my skin burned under their gaze. He walked with her. He took her arm and held it. She felt his fingers.

*He stopped at the park!*

When he said I was beautiful as we stood there under the trees, in the darkness, I felt his strength. My mind knew

that he was lying, that I was not beautiful or very attractive, but my blood did not know. I stood there limp with fright and he stood so close to me that his strength leapt across the gap between us and was in my blood, and I felt as I had never felt before, was mad. And when he took me in his arms suddenly, seized me and held me close and breathed his flattery on my face, I could not move, I had no muscles, no bones, was his completely, and let him lead me into the park without resistance, went as if commanded by a power. I could not fight and did not wish to. We did not talk. We sat in the grass and his arms were around me and my fright disappeared and I was mad there. In one short moment I thought of jumping to my feet and fleeing, but the moment passed and his mouth, heavy and cruel, was on mine and I had no will at all, was like someone else under his hands. The rest was terrible. I ran home alone. He did not follow me.

When Amelia came home, she is saying, she sat outside for a long time. So did I. Later I went to my room alone, avoided Amelia and mother, and all that night I lay awake, frightened to death, ashamed to death. She says that she was ashamed. Why should she have been? It was I who had to be ashamed, who could not look into anyone's eyes for days, who faltered whenever I met Burk Haydon on the street after that, who was glad when he finally left town, and only then could be myself again.

But what she has said cannot be true. She is silent now, and it cannot really be, what she has said. She has said nothing, and all this while I have been dreaming. It cannot be.

Proud, she is saying. *Proud!* She should have been proud?

But listen — it isn't, it can't be Amelia talking! Sorry?

... Have something now?

*I will say that it couldn't make her happier now?*

*I will say that it wasn't lovely?*

*I will say that she wouldn't want to remember it now?*

Slowly, then, Miss Hedwig arose from her chair, arose like a woman dreaming, stood erect in the dark room, her head thrown back, her body straight, strong and heedless and triumphant.

## IV

Miss Amelia's quiet talking lapsed into a sigh, and presently she looked up at Miss Hedwig.

'I shouldn't have told you this,' she suddenly blurted. 'You're criticizing me for it now, aren't you? For daring to suggest that I was wrong in running from him. I shouldn't have told you, Hedwig. But that is what I feel. I can't help it.'

Miss Hedwig stood stiffly erect, breathing heavily now too. Her eyes looked far beyond the room.

'What's wrong with you, Hedwig?' Miss Amelia cried suddenly. 'Are you angry?'

She stood up and came slowly to her sister's side. She touched her arm softly. 'Don't be angry, Hedwig. After all, I didn't go with him. Maybe I'm wrong in saying that I should have. It's age, Hedwig. It's this awful twilight that comes every night, this emptiness, this nothing. Forgive me!'

Miss Amelia began to weep in her handkerchief.

Miss Hedwig relaxed a little. She looked down on Miss Amelia as she cringed by her side, weeping for the emptiness of her life. A dim smile came to Miss Hedwig's mouth, a faint smile, pitying and superior.

'You poor thing, Amelia,' she said. 'Stop crying. I'm not angry. Stop crying and turn on the lights. I'll take the tea things out. It's high time we had supper. Come on, now, Amelia, stop it!'

Miss Amelia sniffled into her handkerchief. She blew her nose and walked across the room. Miss Hedwig's eyes fol-

lowed her. She shook her head pityingly and thought, the poor thing, the poor thing! My years of shame *were* mistaken. She's right! She should be sorry! An ugly brutal thing *is* enough! I *was* put into life!

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## IO

### *An Empty Lot*

IT BOTHERED THE MAN. He had to sit there in his car waiting, and it made him nervous. He kept trying to look away, to look at the street and the shop windows, but he could not keep his eyes turned away. He had a feeling that he was not seeing the whole thing. Then he would turn and look again, and it made him feel that something was wrong.

The boy had a stick in his hands, a mop handle or the sawed-off end of an old broom. But the man could not tell what he was hitting with it, or if he was hitting anything but the ground. The boy was kneeling just inside the opening of a wooden fence made by a couple of missing boards, and the man could see only the part of the stick that he had in his hands. But he could see that the boy's hands were clenched tight on the stick, and he could see the funny, dead-pan expression on the boy's face as, almost methodically, he kept lifting the stick and letting it fall, over and over, with no change of expression. It got so that the man almost thought he could hear the thump that the stick made.

He looked away again. All right, it was a kid with a stick. So what? He looked at the jammed-up, dusty store windows, and he looked down the street ahead of him at the narrowing structure of the elevated as it gradually came to a point many blocks away. The place had the air of uncanny emptiness that out-of-the-way streets in a city have on Sunday afternoons, and the man wanted to get away from there. A

train suddenly roared overhead; but the sound died away almost at once, and he was alone in the block with that kid again. After a while a taxi shot by, and then another car more slowly, and then the block was empty again. The man leaned out of the window of his car and looked up at the side of the building where he was parked, at the dirty lace curtains heavily drawn over the windows, and the windows shut tight, and the structure of the elevated seeming to press against the building, throwing its checkered shadow on the faded red brick walls in the pale sunlight.

Come on, let's get going, he thought; but still the man he was waiting for did not come out of the building. And slowly he turned his head again and looked across the street, at the opening in the fence, at the boy kneeling there on the ground, lifting the stick in his clenched hands, and letting it fall. *Thump*, it seemed to go, and the man knew that he was not seeing the whole thing.

Suddenly he opened the car door, got out, and started to walk rapidly across the street. The boy heard his heels on the pavement and looked up sharply, and for a moment the stick stopped moving, in midair. Then, still looking at the man as he came nearer, the boy let the stick come down very slowly, let it drop without any force, and raised it again. The man stood before the opening in the fence staring at the boy, and the stick came down. The man heard the soft noise it made, and he looked inside. It was no surprise to see a dead dog lying there, its sides flattened out by the perpetual drumming of the stick.

'Why, *you* . . . ' he said.

The sharp tone of his voice made the boy's dark, empty eyes blink in his soiled, white face. He tossed his head to get the hair out of his eyes, and without looking at the dog now, he kept lifting the stick and letting it fall as he stared. He was ten or eleven years old, a very thin kid, and he had an old red sweater with half-unraveled sleeves, ragged pants

that came to his knees, no stockings, and a pair of shoes with holes in the bottoms. The man could see his bare feet through the holes. The close sight of the boy, alone in the bare lot, with the blind backs of closed up buildings all around him, made the man hesitate. And that mangy little dog on the ground, dead, flattened out . . .

He pulled himself together and said, 'Why, you little rat! Why'd you kill that dog?'

The stick went up and down, and the boy looked at the dog. 'I didn't kill him,' he said. 'Why don't ya scam?'

'What do you mean, you didn't kill him? What are you doing there anyway?'

'What's it to ya?'

Again the man hesitated. It could not be right, he was missing something. The methodical way that the boy went at it, over and over, without much force but with almost mechanical relentlessness. It made the man feel sick, and he said, 'Why don't you go play with the kids?'

'What kids?'

'The kids around here. There must be kids around here.'

'What kids?'

'Why don't you get away from that dog? What do you want to worry that dead dog for? Why don't you let it alone?'

'What's it to ya?' the boy asked, tossing his head again. Whenever he bent forward, his straight black hair fell across his forehead and hung in his eyes.

'What's it to me? Why, you . . .'

'Well?'

'What are you hitting that dog for?' the man's voice seemed loud to him in the empty block.

'He's my dog. Why don't ya scam?'

The roar of the elevated was almost a relief, but again the sound died away, and the man said, 'Why'd you kill it? What made you do it?'

'Nuts,' the boy said, and looked back at the dog.

'Where's your old man?'

'How should I know?' the boy asked without looking up.

'Where's your ma?'

The boy did not answer.

'Don't you know any kids around here? Where do you live?'

The boy tossed his head, and the lick of hair fell back beside his ear.

'If it's your dog, why do you want to hit it? Why did you want to kill it?'

'I *didn't* kill him, you bastard!' the boy cried.

'Don't you go calling . . .' He pulled his arm back to cuff the kid.

Surprisingly, he cringed. He doubled down over his knees, crouching away from the man's hand.

'Aw, I'm not going to hurt you,' the man said.

'Honest, I didn't kill him.'

'Who did?'

The boy looked at the dog and said, 'The damn fool ran out in the street and got run over.'

'You're lying.'

'He should've known better. Why'd he wanna do it for? He *did* know better.'

'You're lying.'

'Nuts.' He picked up the stick which he had dropped and almost idly tapped the dog with the end of it.

'Cut that out,' the man said. 'Why don't you go home? Why don't you go play with the other kids?' And then, suddenly outraged, 'For God's sake, cut that out or I'll call a cop.'

The boy only said, 'He's mine, see? I c'n do what I want with him, see?' And, as if in defiance, he struck harder at the dog.

The man felt sick at the sound and reached out to seize

the boy by the neck, but then he heard someone across the street call 'Hey!' to him, and he turned round and saw that it was the man he was waiting for. He straightened up.

The boy had not noticed his anger. He was striking methodically at the dog, a little more forcefully with each blow. The man started to speak again, but then turned away. He felt helpless, caught in something he was missing. But as he stepped toward the curb, away from the fence, he heard the boy's thin voice, and he turned round again.

He saw the boy still kneeling on the hard ground, alone in the empty lot with the dead dog, the two of them made minute by the grimy buildings that seemed suddenly to tower all around the lot; but now the white face was intense with effort and pain, and the boy was hitting the dog as hard as he could, swiftly and furiously, and he was almost yelling, 'God damn you, Jack! Oh, God *damn* you!'

The anguish made the man hurry away, made him walk as fast as he could without running.



## II

### *Little Girls in White*

THE LITTLE GIRLS were having tea in the garden, sitting rather primly, rather stiffly, at their table in the shadow of the blooming syringas. Their white dresses were bright in the sunlight against the lush green of the garden; and the little girls were very careful how they sat lest they wrinkle their dresses. They kept smoothing out their short skirts precisely over their bare legs and fluffing up their short puffed sleeves.

Finally one of them said, 'I'm tired of this *tea*. It's only lemonade anyway, Margie!'

'Why, Ellen Carson! It *is* not! Have you ever *had* tea?'

'No, but I've had *lemonade*! There isn't anything like *yellow* tea! There's only green and black.'

'There is so, Ellen Carson, and this is it!'

'Well, I'm tired of it.' Ellen pushed her small cup away, looked with great weariness at the fragments of dry toast on her plate, and glanced gloomily at Margie.

'All right for you,' said Margie, and she poured herself another cupful.

'There's Jesse,' said Ellen.

The cat came slowly from behind the house and walked around the tea table, then wound itself through the thickly grown base of a syringa bush, shaking the stalks. Some blossoms exploded with small popping noises and the petals dropped down to the table and the ground. Jesse stretched himself in the shadow and rolled over on his back in the dirt.

'Give Jesse some tea, then!' Ellen cried. 'If it is tea, he'll drink it. My grandmother's cat does. If he doesn't, it's lemonade.'

'All right,' said Margie. 'Come here, Jesse.'

The cat lifted its head and looked at her.

'Come, Jesse, Jesse, Jesse,' she called, pouring her saucer full. The cat came slowly toward the table, languorously waving its tail, and Margie put the saucer on the ground. The cat sniffed at the saucer with delicate scorn and went slowly back to the shadows and stretched out again.

'There!' cried Ellen triumphantly. 'I told you, Margie Davis!'

'Jesse drinks *milk*, naturally! Only a queer cat would drink tea. You haven't proved a thing!'

Ellen said stiffly, 'My grandmother's cat is *not* queer.'

With mild conciliation in her voice, Margie said, 'But most cats do drink milk, Ellen. You know they do.'

Ellen dismissed the matter abruptly. 'Oh, let's play something.'

'What?'

'We could play having cocktails.'

'My mother and father have cocktails every night, and I can pour them!'

'That's nothing. When my father has lunch at home, he and mother have them at *noon*. There!'

'My father's a professor,' said Margie, 'and he's got a black gown and a square hat that he wears sometimes!'

'Pooh,' said Ellen. 'That's nothing. My father's a lawyer, and he's got a gown and a square hat too, and a red and blue thing for around his neck besides, and he never wears any of them at all because he doesn't *care* about them!'

Margie said, 'But lawyers don't have anything to wear them *to*, silly!'

'That just shows how much you know,' said Ellen with a fine scorn. 'They do so wear them, if they *want to*!'

'Well, to what?'

'All sorts of things.'

'No, they don't,' said Margie wisely.

'Yes they do.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'No, I said!'

'Ye-es.'

'Margie!' her father suddenly called from an upstairs window. Margie looked up at him, his head poked out of the window. 'Find your mother,' he said. 'I've cut myself.'

'Oh!' said Margie. Her awe held her on her chair.

'Hurry!'

Margie glanced at Ellen. 'Excuse me,' she said with precise importance and rose from the table. She ran round the corner of the house to the terrace where her mother was reading in a deck chair. 'Mummy, Father's cut himself and wants you,' she announced.

'Oh, dear!' said her mother. She pulled a hairpin from her head and put it in the place in her book, then hurried into the house and upstairs. Margie followed quietly behind her. She looked into her father's study through the crack in the door and saw her mother's head bent over her father's hand. Then she saw blood on the floor. She stared at the blood for a moment before she ran down the stairs and out again. She stood beside Ellen breathlessly and said, 'There's blood all over the floor.'

'It must be bad!'

'It's *very* bad!' Margie said.

Then Ellen stood up, and both of them stared at the open window of Margie's father's study.

Presently Margie's mother came around into the garden with her hat on. She said, 'Margie, your father's cut his hand rather badly, and I'm going to drive him to the hospital. We'll be gone only a short time.'

'Oh, is it *bad*?'

'He'll be all right as soon as the doctor ties it up. You'll be a good girl, won't you, Margie?'

'Yes, mummy.'

'And don't wander off the grounds, either of you.'

They watched her disappear round the corner, and then they listened to the motor being started, and heard the sound die away on the street.

'They've gone,' said Ellen.

'You stay here Ellen,' Margie said quickly. 'I'll be right back.'

'Oh, Margie, where you going?'

'You wait, I'll be right back.'

'Oh, Margie, where — what . . .?' Ellen looked dismayed.

'You wait!' Margie said firmly and ran round to the back of the house. She went in cautiously and tiptoed up the stairs. Carefully she pushed open the door of her father's study and looked in. No one was there. She walked into the room without making a sound and looked at the spot of blood on the floor and at the blotches of it on the papers scattered over the desk. Open on the floor, with a stripe of blood on the blade, lay the sharp knife with which her father sharpened his pencils and cut the pages of his books. Then Margie saw what was beside it. For a moment she stared at it, startled and unbelieving. It was the tip of her father's finger, the very top of the tip. She knelt down and looked at it closely for a long time, and at last she picked it up and laid it gingerly in the palm of her hand. She closed her hand over it slowly, as if over a treasure of some sort, and then turned and ran quickly out of the room, down the stairs, and out again.

'Guess what I've got,' she said.

'What?'

'Guess.'

'I give up.'

'Oh, guess!'

'I can't, Margie, I give up.'

Margie opened her hand triumphantly.

'What is it?' Ellen asked.

'Silly, it's what my father cut off from his finger!'

'Oh,' said Ellen, staring at it.

They looked at it in silence for a long time, until at last Ellen said, 'There's a piece of his nail on it. He must have cut right through his nail.'

'Of course he did. It's a very bad cut. He's had to go to the hospital, hasn't he?'

Ellen touched the bloody thing in Margie's hand with the end of her finger and then drew back quickly.

'What's the matter?' asked Margie.

'Nothing.' Ellen touched it again. Then suddenly she said, 'Give it to me, Margie.'

'What for?'

'Please, Margie, give it to me, and then I'll show you.'

'What for?' Margie's hand began to draw back and close over it.

'Give it to me and I'll show you,' Ellen said slowly, exasperated.

'No.'

'Come on, Margie. I want to *show* you something.'

'What?'

'Well, *give* it to me!'

'No.'

'Oh, Margie Davis! You make me *mad!*' Ellen cried. Then, 'Come Jesse, Jesse, Jesse.'

The cat crept out from under the syringas and looked at them. Margie looked at the cat and then quickly back at Ellen. Then she let out a scream of delight. 'Oh, *I* know!'

Forgetting her clean dress, Margie fell quickly to her knees and stretched out her hand. 'Come, Jesse, Jesse, Jesse,' she crooned. The cat lifted its head and sniffed the air, then ran swiftly toward Margie's sticky open palm.

'That's not fair,' Ellen said as she watched. 'I thought of it first and you're a mean thing, Margie Davis, and I'm going right home!'

Margie, engrossed in the precise movement of Jesse's jaws, did not look up. Nor did Ellen move. She watched Jesse, too. And in the green garden, in the sharp sunlight and shadow, their fluffy white dresses looked as bright and tidy as the blossoms on the syringas.



## I2

### *The Dead Dog*

IT WAS a quiet, shady street, on a Sunday afternoon, and the houses, set back on long lawns, looked closed up, deserted. A few people were walking on the street, under the trees, and some children were playing in an empty lot next to a small apartment building. A car passed me, and just then a dog ran out into the street, and the front wheels of the car hit it. The car did not stop, and by the time I had stopped mine it had disappeared round a corner. The old man who had been walking with the dog was standing on the curb, bent over a little, looking down at the dog where it had been thrown in the gutter. The children stopped their playing and drew nearer, and a man and woman paused on the sidewalk behind the old man and stared at him curiously for a moment, said something to each other, and went on, looking back at him over their shoulders. I got out and started to walk toward him, and then he did a curious thing.

He bent over and fastened the leash which he had in his hand onto the collar of the dead dog. I was beside him when he straightened up, but he did not look at me. He was looking down at the animal and pulling at the leash with insistent little tugs, as if he thought that the dog might be persuaded to come along. It was perfectly clear that the dog was dead.

He was a very old man who had behaved as a child would behave in the same situation, pretending in the face of catastrophe that no catastrophe had occurred. At the same time, he was trembling with shock and grief, with the knowl-

edge of what had happened. I was afraid that he might topple over, so I said, 'Sit down here and I'll bring my car closer,' and helped him to a sitting position on the curb. Still he said nothing, still had not even looked at me. He sat staring at the dog, with the leash shaking in his hand.

The children had moved into the middle of the street, where the three of them stood in a line and stared. One of them suddenly began a shrill crying, 'She's dead! She's dead!' and ran back to the sidewalk across the street. The others followed, and then they all ran into the middle of the street and circled back again, all crying in a shrill, excited chorus, 'She's dead!' I was going to tell them to be quiet, but then I saw that the old man did not hear even their racket. I walked back to my car to save him that many steps.

I drove up to where he was and got out again. I touched his shoulder and said, 'Tell me what I can do. Where do you live?'

He looked up at me with watering eyes, and then down at the dog again, and said, 'She's dead. Cissy's dead.' He said it with something like awe in his voice, with a child's frightened incredulity. He was trembling more than ever, utterly confused, really sick with fright and shock, and, of course, grief for his dog. And again he said, 'Cissy's dead,' as if he had to restate the fact to himself if he was to understand it.

'I'll put the dog in the back, and you get in the front with me,' I said.

I bent over the dog and was about to unfasten the leash from the collar when he said, 'No, leave that on. Don't take that off.'

I said, 'All right. Shall I take the other end of it?'

He handed me the end of the leash, and I picked up the dog. It was a wire-haired terrier with some Airedale in it, and overfed — not much of a dog as dogs go. And now it was heavy, sagging with the heavy limpness of newly dead ani-

mals, and a trickle of blood was drying on its muzzle. I picked it up and put it on the floor in the back of the car, and rolled up the trailing leash.

From his seat on the curb the old man watched me handle the dog, and when I had closed the back door and came toward him he said, 'Take me to 14 Stephens Street, will you?'

I said, 'Yes. Let me help you in.'

He seemed now to have more or less taken in his situation, but he was not able to get to his feet. I helped him up and then had almost to lift him into the car. I could feel how frail he was, and how powerful the blow which, for the moment, had shattered what small strength he had.

I went around and got in beside him and started the motor. 'Stephens Street's only a few blocks from here,' I said. 'I'll have you home in a moment.'

As we started off, the three children, who were standing quietly on the other curb now, staring, began their high screaming again: 'She's dead! She's dead!'

The old man looked at the fixtures on the door of the car and said, 'May I have some air?'

I ran down the window on his side. Then he said, 'I'm not well. I've been sick for five years — not feeling quite well.'

'I'm sorry. You'll be all right now, won't you, until you get home?'

He breathed quickly, as if to get as much of the fresh air into his lungs as he could, and said, 'You'll see that I get home? It's 14 Stephens Street.'

I said, 'Yes,' and drove a little faster.

His hands, which he held gripped together in his lap, were clean and well-kept. White hair hung in neat wisps under the upturned brim of his black hat, and he had a carefully tended white beard. His clothes were black, clean, and a little worn. Altogether, he looked like a retired professor, like a man who had grown old in gentle surroundings and a pleasant profession.

We turned into Stephens Street. I would have placed him somewhere else. Stephens Street was deserted, drab, without trees. The packed rows of houses with their blank windows seemed two-dimensional. Number 14 Stephens Street was exactly like the houses on either side of it.

‘This is it, isn’t it?’

He looked out at the building and said nothing, and except for his trembling, which had not abated, he did not move.

‘I live with my daughter-in-law,’ he said finally. ‘My son’s dead. It’s her house.’

The building was hard and ugly in the afternoon light, a tall frame structure painted a shade of tan which reflected the sunlight in a solid glare. It was obviously a three-flat arrangement, with ugly dark interiors, and grim people.

‘My son’s been dead for four years,’ he said.

‘I’ll take you in,’ I said.

He looked at me with his sorrowing eyes as if he were asking a question, and I thought I answered the question when I said, ‘Yes, I’ll carry the dog in.’

I helped him out, but instead of moving toward the house with me he clung to the open door of the car and looked down into the back where his dog lay with the leash on her collar.

‘What shall I tell my daughter-in-law?’ he asked in his quavering tones.

‘Well, Cissy’s yours, after all,’ I said.

His voice turned a little shrill. ‘Oh, no! No!’ he cried. ‘She’s always told me — she’s told me time and again that I must never let Cissy off the leash! I *knew* it, I *knew* it — I was *told* —’

And then suddenly he let go of the door and sat down heavily on the running board, and I saw that he was looking at me not with grief at all, but with absolute, quaking terror. It was the terror of a child who knows the punishment ahead.

I looked at the bare front of the house, and for a moment I had an impulse not to take him in there at all. But of course there was nothing else to do.



## 13

### *The Long Embrace*

**T**HE ACCIDENT took place on a foggy evening, at about six o'clock, just outside the city, and very near one of the big municipal hospitals. It was no time at all before the ambulance had picked up the patient, who was unconscious, and had her in the hospital. In the operating room her eyelids began to flutter, and the attending surgeon, an elderly man, ordered ether. 'Keep her under,' he said. 'This looks like a long job. And get Carver at once to handle the pelvis. I don't want to touch it, and there's plenty to keep me busy. Checked the heart action?'

'Abnormally slow.'

'Adrenalin.'

The fluttering eyelids of the patient opened wide just before the ether mask covered her face. In her condition, she submitted to the anaesthetic without struggle, in fact, as it seemed, eagerly . . .

. . . you might have been under the sea. The trees had lost the spininess of earth, had been turned to veils which undulated gently and with infinite luxuriance in the slow currents that ceaselessly brush across the incalculable bottom of the sea. It was late afternoon, and there was a green light in the air still which intensified this sense of a submarine world, and only the greenness saved vegetation from monstrous appearances. And somewhere the sun was shining curiously, and sending strange, horizontal beams of pink and yellow light through the thickness, rays which died in the very act of

penetrating the fragile, inexorable barrier of fog, but which, still, before they died, hurt badly, cut like spears, sheared like knives, grated cruelly like bone splintered in the thighs, the stomach and the chest, the very head and brain. And yet the fog saved her from the ultimate, grinding pain, blurred things softly, and let pain swim in almost dreamlike waves against her, as she herself swam dreamlike, boneless, in the fog, in the remote depths of water.

Then out of the billowing gray a voice began to come. 'Back her up,' it said flatly, distantly at first. 'Back her up, back her up, back her up. There you are, there you are, there you are.'

Through what immeasurable depths of ocean did this familiar repetition of sounds float? 'Back her up, back her up, back her up.' The cold and metal voice, the dying, dropping sound? 'Back her up, back her up, back her up,' and, 'There you are, there you are, there you are.' This was a dead, metallic voice which she knew, a voice which made no effort to lift itself above the steady, monotonous hum of motors which was like the deadened roar of waves on a distant beach, yet effortlessly detached itself from the whole background of throbbing sound and flatly said, 'Back her up, back her up, back her up.' The voice was empty of everything but metal words, no fear, no pity, no dread of catastrophe, no love of it either, was catastrophe itself, articulate and cold: 'Back her up, back her up, back her up.'

In the glistening, slightly tilted mirror she saw behind her how, in that subaqueous world, a corridor appeared, empty and cold and infinite, its narrowing length beyond the power of the mirror to tell, but infinite, infinite, white and gleaming and cruelly empty, endless as it narrowed down to a point no eye could truly find, stretching endlessly through the gray, green, billowing world. And, 'Back her up, back her up, back her up,' the voice relentlessly said over the rising roar.

Then, as dread accumulated and mingled with the already

experienced pain, these two illogically mixed, the fear and the fact which was feared; then, as all the motion of the world took on both violence and order, the green fog swirling now into patterned arrangements of wheels and wheels and wheels, and the rays of curious sunlight suddenly swinging up, much brighter, as from points of earth, and wheeling out in patterned revolutions piercing the fog but never finding sky; then, as all sound came together in the powerful and helpless drone of one motor, and that somewhere above, lost in the depths, and for which the lights made their vain and ordered search — then, fixing her glance with sober frenzy on the mirror in which the endless corridor stood askew, she began to back, back, back, first fearfully, and slowly as the voice was slow, then, as gradually it spoke more rapidly, terrorized, and faster, faster, faster; and at last the machine was moving backward with such terrific speed that she knew that she was no longer driving it, but that it was compelled, pulled back by space itself, the magnet of space fixed on the helpless object of time, which now charged back and back and back, as still the voice said, 'Back her up, back her up, back her up,' and dread became an unendurable ecstasy of suspense. And then abruptly the voice changed, and it was the old man's voice, quavering and uncertain, yet speaking the same words; and as the machine flew ever backwards, the old man himself appeared, a crazy, yellow figure dancing like fury before her, down the limitless corridor, forever down, and always faster, faster, faster. But with the change in the voice, dread dissipated itself, and now she was laughing at the joke, and the old man, dancing in his painful fury before her, laughed too, with the toothless gums in his yellow, ancient face. And then at last, with an effortless transition from concrete to air, the machine lifted itself from the ground, from the corridor, from the old man, was in the fog itself, and, in the revolving lights, found its own orbit at last. Then there was once more the infinite luxury of submarine motion in her body, and all pain

was gone; only the undulation of the orbit itself, in the bright light, as the light went ever out and out into space, and the orbit with it, the marvelous magnetized arc in space which held her, orbit in space dipping, dropping, rising, falling, out, out, out into the darker air, the sound of the motor above fainter and fainter, the voice retreating, retreating, a vast silence preparing itself for the secret she was to learn at last out here, in space unendurably cold yet not felt as cold, as the orbit was graying, then was lost, and fog lost, sea lost, sound lost, voice lost, only cold and black left as out, out, out toward knowledge she comfortably moved.

*The mask was lifted from the face. 'Under,' said the attendant.*

*'Observe the heart action closely,' said the surgeon to the nurse.*

*A young man, black eyes alert above his mask, came into the brilliant, shining room.*

*'Hello, Carver,' said the older man, and with his glittering instrument he indicated the patient's pelvic region.*

*The young man grunted and glanced briefly at the patient's face.*

Quite suddenly, and, as it seemed, not curiously, she was on solid earth again, in a familiar world. Her hard heels struck sharply on the sidewalk as she went rapidly down the street from her mother's house to the garage where she kept her car. It was a late September afternoon heavy with fog, and she was anxious to get to the airport where, she knew, Dave was soon going to make a landing that would not be easy. He would not be pleased to see her there again, but it was a funny thing the way you got over shame, over the most terrific insults to your pride, got over your pride itself when you were really put to it.

She pushed the heavy garage doors apart and slid in through the aperture. Ether Voice was scraping spark plugs at the repair bench. 'Hi,' she said.

'Hello, Miss Walton. Going out?'

'Yes.'

'It's a bad afternoon.'

'Not too bad.'

'Pop'll help you out.'

The old man was beside her, bobbing up and down a little, his zany's grin on his parchment face.

'Hello,' she said to him, and, smiling to herself, walked back along the rows of cars to her own, with the old man limping along behind her. Sometimes she wondered why the old man amused her so, what it was about an old man with yellow skin, no teeth to speak of and one foot in the grave, that was funny. Most people would pity him, she supposed, so old, and having to work still, and in a garage that was not any too warm and cozy in winter, sleeping in a chair through long winter nights in the drab, concrete office, which is what he had to do when he was on night duty, and that was most nights, because his son had to get real sleep to run the place in the daytime when the real work was done. It was that he was both so old and always so foolishly chipper that was funny. She was fond of him, as one might be of someone mildly defective, and she had a pet name for him, and one for his son, too. To herself she called the father Old Death, and what an archaic clown he was! The other, because of his flat, monotonous voice, like the emotionless voices one hears under anaesthetic, she called Ether Voice. Their real names she did not know.

She edged her way through the narrow space between her car and the next and climbed in behind the wheel. The old man stood in the clear space in front, his hand up, prepared to signal her to come ahead. She started the motor, glanced at him, smiled, and heard him say in his high, croaking voice, 'All right, bring her out, bring her out, bring her out.' His bony old hand beckoned her in a circular motion.

She put the machine in gear and let it move slowly ahead. Almost at once it scraped up against the fender of the car on

the right. She pulled on her brake and stopped short. The old man was grinning helplessly and shaking his head, and Ether Voice, who had looked up sharply, came toward them at a run.

'By God, Pop, you gotta watch what you're doin'!' he said in his metallic voice, from which one could not have known that he was angry.

'I thought them wheels was straight,' the old man wheezed.

'Okay,' said Ether Voice, and, looking up at her, 'Half our profits the old man uses up in the fenders and bumpers we gotta repair. He can't get a car in and he can't get it out without somethin'.'

She put her head down on the steering wheel and laughed. 'Every time,' she cried, 'every time! He doesn't miss a chance!' Something in these little accidents, these parodies of catastrophe for which the old man was always responsible, seemed almost unbearably amusing to her; now she was laughing so hard that tears came to her eyes.

'It ain't funny any more,' Ether Voice said, and looked briefly at the old man who stood there grinning, ashamed of his ancient incompetence, and, with his good foot, kicking at a post like a schoolboy.

'All right, Miss Walton,' Ether Voice said. 'Turn your wheels sharp and back her up.'

She put the car into reverse and straightened the wheels.

'All right, back her up,' he said in his flat tone, his hand waving her back. 'Go on, back her up, back her up. There you are.'

She was about to move the car forward again when they heard the telephone in the office ringing loudly.

'Wait,' said Ether Voice, 'till I answer that.'

He trotted up to the front of the garage, disappeared, and in a moment came back again. 'It's your mother. Wants to know if her daughter is here. Wants you to come home a minute.'

'Oh Christ!' she said.

Ether Voice said, 'All right, now. Bring her out, bring her out.' Slowly she edged the car out of its space, and then swung it round to face the doors, which the old man was straining to open. Ether Voice walked along beside the car and said, 'Now take it easy, Miss Walton. It's bad driving.'

'Okay,' she said, and, waving to the two of them, slid out into the gray-pink fog. Once she had heard him say to the old man, 'Any dame that drives like that one's got somethin' eatin' at her,' and she could remember the old man's meaningless grin which almost suggested relish. And now, in her impatience, she pressed her foot hard on the gas and drove the few blocks to her home swiftly, recklessly through the mist, pulled up in front of the house with a jerk, jumped out, slammed the door, and ran up the steps. She went directly to the sitting room where she knew her mother would be, and there she was, sitting heavily in the firelight on a little settee which she seemed to crowd, a decanter of sherry and two glasses on the table before her, her fat legs stuck rather ridiculously out, the great knees apart, and her little hands folded tidily in her lap. Something in the neat arrangement of waves in her mother's hair, something about the genteel gray hair itself, so well-kept and glistening in the firelight, outraged her.

'What is it?'

Her mother smiled with studied patience. 'Sit down, dear.'

Marge gave a tug at her hat. 'Well, what?'

'Sit down.'

Impatiently she sat down on the edge of a chair. 'What?'

'Darling, you're looking lovely. That blue, fuzzy wool becomes you — your eyes, and your hair. It makes your hair positively yellow! I like it combed down that way. Makes you look like fifteen.'

'Come on, mother, what is it?'

'Don't always be so sharp, dear. It's only that when I saw that you'd gone out, without saying anything, I was worried. That's all. Where were you going?'

'For heaven's sake!'

'I'm serious, Marge. Do take off your hat. Have a glass of sherry with me. Be my daughter for a change.'

'What rot. Come on, mother, what do you want?'

Her mother hesitated, and then, in a helpless little voice which was comic in a woman so heavy, she cried, 'Oh Marge, what's wrong with you? Tell me. What is it?'

'If you didn't have a pretty good idea, you wouldn't be worried.'

'No, Marge. Just your driving. That's enough to worry me enormously.'

'What about my driving? I like to drive, that's all. I like machinery. I like to make it go.'

'But you're so reckless.'

'Anybody who knows how to handle a car can't be reckless. Now what is it, really?'

Her mother bent over and poured sherry into the glasses. 'Here, dear,' she said.

'I don't like the stuff, thanks.'

Mrs. Walton sipped at her glass. 'Well, there *is* more than your driving, then. You haven't always been this way. So — nervous, distraught. So abrupt with me.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. But look, I am in a hurry. May I go now?'

'Where are you going?'

'You know perfectly well.'

'To the airport?'

'Yes. To see Dave Roberts make a landing.'

'That man.'

'A good man, ma. Too good for me, I guess.'

'What do you mean? You, who have every opportunity. Think of the expense to which I went to educate you, then to bring you out properly, and now you won't have anything

to do with your own kind of men. Or the girls, for that matter.'

'Bores, mother. The most terrific bores, all of them. I can't stand them. I'm sorry about the expense, but it was never I who wanted to come out. Or any of the rest of it.'

'But that man — that *Roberts!*'

Marge stood up. 'Get something straight, mother,' she said. 'I'm in love with him. In love? No. Crazy. I'd give anything to get him. *Anything*. You're right. Something is wrong. I'm slightly crazy.'

Mrs. Walton struggled to her feet, and her lacy teagown fell about her short legs in heavy folds, shrouded her dainty feet. 'Marge, stop! I won't listen to this from you. I won't, I tell you.'

'You asked for it,' Marge said quietly.

'Do you mean to *marry* this man?'

She laughed. 'Marry? Listen, a girl in my position doesn't hold out for marriage.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I mean he thinks I'm so much dirt.'

'Oh!' Her heavy shoulders hunched up in outrage, and her bosom rose and fell above her folded arms.

'It's true. How about it? Can I go now?'

'No. Sit down another moment. I want to tell you something.' Mrs. Walton spoke quietly, with an effort.

'Well, what?'

'You know that I've not had an easy life. Bringing up a child, always headstrong and increasingly so, and in all these last, difficult years, I've had no help, I no husband, you no father. And now, Marge, don't you see, this hurts doubly, because somehow it must be *my* fault. If your father had lived, if you had a father now who could talk to you, I'm sure ——'

'It isn't a father I need.'

Mrs. Walton blinked rapidly. 'Marge, you wretched girl!'

‘Don’t I know it?’

She waited to go, and as she stood she felt a sharp twinge of pain in her chest, or her bowels, and slowly, as she stood there, and the room began to fade from sight, it grew into a terrible pain in her whole body, a ripping, tearing pain, and as she cried out, she knew that what she said had never been said. ‘Oh my God, mother, help me!’

*‘Mask! Mask!’*

But her mother was already gone, had vanished in the mist which was swirling in the room, and the glow of the firelight had transformed itself into beams of searchlights, and the roar of a motor grew loud in her ears again, and it was suddenly very cold as she was driving faster and faster and faster until she was shrieking with terror, and shrieking a strange thing, something else she had never said, ‘Father, help me, father, father!’ But when at last, in the cold blackness, she was free of the car and found herself moving slowly out and out into the space beyond, where there were no longer any searchlights but only a few distant stars, or any sounds, or any pain, she moved with strange, compliant comfort, until she knew that in a moment she would have moved out of mind and into that knowledge toward which she yearned now in agony and joy.

*‘Okay. Way under.’*

*‘Pulse?’*

*‘Dropping.’*

*‘Watch it.’*

And then she was on the ground again, driving fast but safely, the fog heavier and the day a little darker, taking the last curve on the highway before she turned in at the airport, then swinging her wheel sharply, and coasting into the nearly

empty parking space. She pulled on the brake, jumped out, rushed into the brightly lighted, metallic place, and asked the first person she saw, 'Is Roberts down yet?'

'Coming down now, ma'am.'

She ran on down the shining corridor and out again, into the fog. She heard a droning motor above her in the mist, and she saw how all the sentinel lights were obscured on the ground in the deepening fog. The big searchlights were on, playing on the air, and in their powerful, barrel-like beams, the fog swirled in clouds. But the beams, even before they narrowed, were drowned, dissipated, blurred, unable to penetrate far the incredible murk. She glanced up at the controls tower where she could see the operators through the big windows, and she wished that she could get up there and listen to them bring him down, but she knew that they would prevent her. She clutched a moist, chromium railing and waited, listening to the steady roar of his motor as he circled the field.

As she stood there, she had only one desire, to be up there with him, to feel what he was feeling, to know what it was like to identify so perfectly the will and the mechanism and make this mechanical triumph over these non-mechanical obstacles, and come down smoothly, sweeping onto the ground exactly as you had calculated, but never knowing that you were going to; or not making the triumph, and come booming down from the soft, treacherous fog into the solid, smashing concrete as you had not calculated. The tension in either case was something which, even as she stood there on the earth, she could feel, she was certain, as powerfully as he, whose tension it was.

She clutched the railing with both hands and strained her face upward.

His motor now sounded farther away, then seemed to have stopped entirely, then picked up again with a sudden, near-by roar, and in the next moment she saw him come taxi-ing down

the concrete, the glittering, silver machine through the fog like an obscure monster in a dream. She waited for him. When he came through the gate she stepped up to him. 'That was very neat,' she exclaimed.

He paused and stared at her. 'My God,' he said. 'Again!' 'Sorry.'

She walked along the runway with him, trotting at his side to keep up with him, and into the bright interior. He stopped abruptly and turned to her, his face red with exasperation. 'Listen ——' he said.

'Oh, don't say it!'

'Well, good Lord ——'

'I know, I know. Just don't say it again.'

'Now, listen —'

'No, no, don't.'

'I've got to report,' he said.

'Okay. I'll wait,' she said, and watched him disappear up a little flight of metal stairs. Presently he came down again and, without speaking, walked by her into the restaurant. She followed him in and sat down beside him on one of the leather-topped stools at the bar.

'Coffee, Marie,' he said, pushing his pilot's cap back on his head.

'Two.'

He turned and looked at her. 'What do you want, anyway?'

'Don't be silly.'

'Well, why don't you give up? No kidding, I'm not interested.'

'Listen, Dave,' she said, watching her fingers as she unwrapped one of the squares of sugar and dropped it into her coffee. 'I'm not asking for much. I'm not trying to involve you in anything. I know you don't want to get mixed up with a woman. But you won't, don't you see? What I can give you, you probably pay for other places. And you'd be just as free.'

'Jesus, what a woman!'

'Well, why not? Am I ugly? What's the matter with me? Am I ugly? Do I smell?'

He almost smiled at her. 'You know you're damned attractive, that you've got everything a girl needs, including bucks. You got so much that you ought to have better things to do than chase me.'

She put down her cup. 'Sorry. I haven't.'

'Well, why *me*?' he suddenly cried, so that the girl behind the counter heard and turned her bleached head sharply to stare at them. 'Why *me*?' he asked more softly.

'Why? I don't know. It just is you, that's all. You just happen to be everything, see? I don't know why. Maybe it's the way you can bring a plane down. Besides being so beautiful.'

He stared at her curiously. 'You know, you make me uncomfortable,' he said, 'because I don't think it's me at all. It's something else you're after, something you got me mixed up with. Maybe just flying. Well, there are a lot of better fliers than me around.'

'Something else?'

'Yeah. Girlish fancy about speed, or danger, or something.'

'Maybe,' she said. 'But there it is.'

'I can't accommodate.'

She paused. 'Look, there is something else. I'm no tart, you know, if you happen to think so.'

He laughed briefly.

She looked squarely into his dark eyes. 'Dave,' she said, 'didn't you ever do anything you didn't want to do particularly? Just to be generous? Just to help someone out who was in a bad way? Didn't you?'

'Sorry,' he said, 'I got a girl, and I don't want another. It just happens. Besides, she wouldn't like it. Which reminds me, I got a phone call to make. Excuse me.'

He got up and started toward the door, and she stood up too, and ran after him. She caught his arms, and he swung round to face her. She half-moaned, 'Listen, take me outside for just one second. Embrace me for just one second. Kiss me, just once!' There were tears crowding out of her closed eyes.

'For Christ's sake!' he said, pulled his arms loose, and went out.

'Dave? That girl?' she cried, and her terrible yearning turned into pain.

He disappeared, and as she stood there, with her hand out, the pain spread in her chest and bowels again, slow at first and not hard, but then growing, and growing, and then she was calling loudly to Dave, something she had never said, she knew, 'Dave, for God's sake, help me, you hurt me,' and then the pain was so terrific that it seemed to lift her from the ground, and she saw how the fog was pouring in through the windows, filling the room, and the room vanishing, and Dave vanishing, and herself alone again, somewhere in space, in one of those beams again, moving out and out, and in her car again, driving furiously, furiously, out and out and out toward the blackness and the tiny stars, and with the knowledge suddenly that she was going to learn something, hear a voice from the motor drone, hear something which would explain everything, so that she would know at last, in the empty blackness, from the furious speed, what her whole life was a struggle to learn, if she did not smash up first, if terror did not drown her, learn what this fog, these lights, this roar of machinery, this grinding pain, these cries to him for help, were for . . .

*'Mask, quick!'*

*'Here.'*

*'How is the heart?'*

*'Slower, Doctor.'*

*'Adrenalin.'*

*'This is ticklish,' the young doctor muttered through his mask.*

*'There, she's going under again.'*

... and now out and out into the blackness, where pain ceased, and danger ceased, and sound and light and real motion, and you were hurled smoothly in this curious way to the secret of everything which was all you yearned for in the blackness and the unfelt cold . . .

But then, once more, everything was real enough again, and she had learned nothing except that now it was necessary to drive as fast as she could, tear up the highway, away from him, racing back to what? Home? The garage? She did not know. But she knew that she had to press the gas down as hard as it would go and take these corners sharp, let up a little as she came to them, and then, as she went into the curve, press down hard so that the tires stuck on the right side and she swept out free and fast into the straightaway.

Somewhere the sun was shining, sinking, sending a curious pinkness through the fog, and the air was faintly green, because it was day still, but the trees which shed the greenness on either side of the highway were limp and strange, like trees under water, dripping and waving like vegetation under the sea, listless and graceful, like dancers waving their arms.

Careful! She jammed her foot on the brake so that her tires screamed, swept up on the wrong side of the curve, but met nothing, and coasted over again on the right side, and then once more let the motor out. Her hat was on the seat beside her, and her hair streamed in the wind like a flag and the wet air struck her face sharply like hands. Ahead, the fog was red with the lights of the city going on, and now, through the thinning trees along the highway, the lights of houses shone. She pressed down hard on the gas and heard the soft roar of her engine in the deepening dusk, and the machine fled, or charged, along the dim highway, swept

round curves, leaped up rises and roared into declines like an armored beast, enraged and incredibly powerful. She drove with a controlled fury, her hands exerting only a normal pressure on the wheel, but her foot pressed down hard, and her face lifted, almost expectantly, as if this speed were about to reveal something momentous to her, as if this speed were itself an answer to something, this speed which then seemed more important than anything in her life, even life, even Dave.

She was coming to the intersection with the highway which led directly into the city, and she took her foot off the accelerator. At the intersection she stopped for lights. She was breathing hard with excitement. Then she got her signal and turned sharply right, onto the city highway. Here the traffic was heavier, and she had to drive more slowly, but still she drove faster than she should have, unable to keep her speed down, darting in and out between cars, expertly, and not troubled by the fog now because the highway was illuminated, not troubled, as long as she kept up her speed, by thought.

She came to a stretch without traffic, and she let out the motor again. The powerful purr of the engine pleased her, and, leaning forward a little, her hands light on the wheel, she smiled. Only then she saw that she was taking a curve, sweeping out on the wrong side, and, too late, sweeping ahead at lights, a great shape, a truck, then a tremendous jolt, and then nothing at all . . .

. . . nothing but blackness, out into which she kept moving, free of her car now, and moving wonderfully in a regular circle, a circle which widened and widened, and as it did so letting all sensations, one by one, fall away. A familiar voice was saying 'Back her up, back her up,' a flat, metallic voice, a voice without feeling or meaning, a voice at once strange and familiar in its curious, mechanical repetitiousness. This voice, in the blackness, was her only sensation. Lights and

roaring and pain had gone, and in the blackness, as she swung ever out and out, nearer toward what seemed to be a few cold, distant, unblinking stars, only the voice stayed with her. Now even that was changing, changing to the older voice — and as the voice changed, she felt her whole being wracked with longing — the slightly wheezing voice, the clownish voice, and the words changed, and now, as she seemed to straighten her course and soar swiftly and cleanly out toward the distant stars, the new voice said, 'Bring her in, bring her in, bring her in.' Everything she had ever felt seemed concentrated now into a single yearning desire to be with the voice and then presently, in the blackness, the form itself appeared, the old man, motioning with mechanical regularity, until, weeping with desire, she came to where he was.

And then she began to laugh, as, in that outermost place, she felt his arms grip her and, in that embrace, they moved farther out together. She was laughing, and wanting to say something, for now everything was clear. She looked close into his face as they sped through blackness, at the old skin, and the toothless jaws, and the zany's relishing grin, and she laughed again, as she had often laughed at him without knowing quite why, this ancient clown. But his arms were sinewy around her, and there was no longer any wondering in her mind, any yearning in her anywhere. She closed her eyes, and this embrace was everything — Dave, mother, father, life — and her laughter died to a smile. She opened her eyes and, in his thin arms at last, swam out with infinite pleasure, in the cold blackness, toward those cold and distant stars which now, slowly, were blinking out.

*Later, in the doctors' dressing room, the two men were talking.*

*'Who was she?' the young man asked.*

*'She's just been identified,' said the other. 'Her name was Marge Walton. Rich girl.'*

*'Marge Walton! No fooling? I've seen that car. What a baby!'*

*'So?'*

*'Big, open, high-powered foreign job. Black, with a lot of chromium on it. Long as a boat. Like a big, roaring beetle. What a waste!'*

*'You could probably pick it up cheap now.'*

*'Yeah!' laughed the young man. 'After she tied it up in knots.'*

*The old man was buttoning his shirt and suddenly paused. He looked at the young man and shook his head.*

*'I don't understand it. She was banged up pretty badly, it's true, and she had lost some blood, but not enough to cut her off like that. From the moment she came in, everything began to slow up. The adrenalin didn't begin to take hold! She wasn't trying very hard, I'm afraid.'*

*And the young man, who was about to leave, said, 'Some want to live, some don't. That's something we don't know about, and something they don't — until they go under. Well, I'll see you.'*



## I4

### *Come Again, Young Man*

THEY WERE SITTING on the steps in front of the girl's house, leaning on their elbows, their legs stretched out. The boy stared at the Georgian dormitories across the street and the neat Ionic columns of the library. The trees were bright red and yellow, and leaves kept falling listlessly to the fading grass. Smoke was curling up from a pile of leaves.

'It's different in your last year,' the boy said. 'It's a lot different.'

The girl looked at him briefly. 'Is it?'

'Everything's clearer, sort of,' he said. 'Buildings, trees — people, too. Smoke makes you feel sad.'

The girl sat up suddenly and said, 'You know, Johnny, I've been thinking — my father really ruined my mother's life. That's what it comes down to.'

He turned in quick surprise. 'Your father is a great man, Gay.'

She twirled a flower in her hand — a late daisy she had pulled up idly in a meadow where they had been walking — and said, 'Oh, he's all right, of course he is, he's a dear, but he *is* stuffy.'

'He's the greatest headmaster in this country!'

'Don't be so solemn,' she laughed, twirling the daisy in his face. 'Headmaster!' She leaned on her elbows again, threw her head back, and stared up at the sky.

'Think how full of excitement the world is,' she cried, 'and

— and *life!* I want to be great, a really great artist. I want to be the great pianist that Marian didn't become, and play before huge audiences, and be applauded, be *really* great!' She turned to him abruptly and asked, 'Do you think I can be?'

'You sound like Katharine Hepburn,' he said quietly, but his breath caught as he looked at her.

She ignored him. 'Marian's wonderful,' she said, 'and Dearest, too. . . . I'm going in!'

He touched her forearm. 'Gay . . .'

'What?'

'Gay, listen,' he said, 'I love you.'

She laughed. 'Let's go in,' she said, and jumped up.

He stood up and said again, 'Gay . . .'

 But she was opening the door, and he followed her into the house.

Her mother and grandmother were in the music-room, and he shook hands with each of them, and then Mr. Baring, the headmaster, himself appeared, like a shadow from somewhere in the room. He seemed slighter than he did out of doors or in chapel, and his voice seemed softer in that room. He greeted the boy and turned to speak to Gay, but she was settling down between the two women on a sofa. Each of them took one of her hands.

'We were just going to have some of the *Tristan* music,' Marian Baring said. 'Do you like it?'

He said that he did, and sat down on a hard chair, frail and old, with a yellow satin seat. When he turned to speak to Mr. Baring again, he had gone.

The red-cheeked grandmother started to get up from the narrow sofa, but Gay cried, 'No, Dearest, let me!' She went quickly to the phonograph, and presently the music began to pour into the room, softly at first, then louder and louder, until the delicately-papered walls might have burst with the swell. Gay tiptoed back to her seat between her mother and grandmother. Dearest's eyes were closed tightly, everything

in the room shut out from her; Marian's eyelids drooped, as if she were dozing in a warm place; only Gay's were open, clear and exultant. Together the three of them swayed gently back and forth, their heads and shoulders just perceptibly moving.

The old grandmother was garish. She wore a green silk dress that made her face, in spite of the bright spots of rouge on her cheeks and the lipstick on her mouth, look like wrinkled yellow parchment; her white hair was not quite ordered, and not quite white; long drops of jet shook from her ears, and she wore rings on her fingers and bracelets on her wrists.

Gay's mother had some of Dearest's features, but she looked like an artist of the early twenties: black hair combed tight against her head, heavy brows and sleepy eyes, and an ivory-white skin; dressed simply in a linen blouse, high at the neck and full in the sleeves, which hung over a rather long black skirt.

Gay, taller than they, with her father's hair, straight and the color of sand, wore a rough skirt and woolly sweater with a short string of pearls. Her bare arms and legs were tanned, and her face had the brown, scrubbed look that Johnny found so moving, with a gleam in her cheeks and chin, and lips the color of coral. Her eyes, blue like her father's, had a curious light in them as she listened, which made her lovelier than ever, but which left Johnny, set away from the three of them on his straight chair, looking vaguely unhappy.

When Gay rose to turn the record, no one spoke; a long, harsh sigh from the grandmother and the click of the machine were the only sounds. They settled down on the sofa again until the record was finished. Gay snapped off the machine.

The old woman opened her black eyes and said in her deep, cracked voice, 'Oh, dear! How I yearned to sing Isolde!'

Gay, leaning against the victrola, said to Johnny, 'I told you that Dearest sang in opera when she was young, didn't I?'

And the old woman, with a shiver of acute remembrance in her voice, 'Oh, those days! *Those days!*'

'It was in Richmond, Virginia,' Marian said, 'that you first sang Isolde, Dearest. I remember the flowers in your dressing-room afterwards — you were a *great* success, and *so* beautiful! And the people driving off in their carriages, horses prancing, and the city very gay! I was a little girl in a white dress, with pink flowers in my hair, and I sat in a box with my black nurse. I was proud!'

Gay, in her clear, high voice, cried, 'Wasn't it thrilling!' And, to her grandmother, her voice more subdued, 'Your life was so lovely! Oh, I *shall* be a pianist!'

'Of course, you will, child! Of course, you will!' Dearest croaked.

'Tell him about Prince Rupert and the jewels,' Gay said.

The old woman wagged her head. 'That's our secret, child,' she said. 'We must all keep some secrets if we are to live at all. But the Prince was very gracious. . . .'

'She was just one step from the Metropolitan. . . .' Marian mused.

'Well,' said the old woman, 'one step or two, but — oh yes, close! Only those were hard years, and Art suffered. And our poor company was forced to disband. And the Metropolitan wasn't hiring young singers in those lean years. And your father, Marian, never really approved, as you know. He was a hard man in some ways, with fixed masculine ideas about the proprieties, and glad, really, that my career ended. I don't think he ever quite understood me, my needs. . . .'

'But, Dearest, he loved you,' Gay said, 'surely he *loved* you!'

'Loved me? Of course he loved me — in his unbending way. But sometimes —' She broke off, held her hands out before her and looked at the glittering array of rings on her fingers. 'I'm sentimental about that music. Let's do have just the *Liebestod*, if the young man doesn't mind.'

'I'd like it,' he said quietly.

Gay started the phonograph, and the three women again sat together on the crowded sofa, swaying to the rise and fall. When the *Liebested* was finished, the old woman opened her eyes and looked at Johnny closely, then began to wag her index finger at him. 'Art and Love, Art and Love! You men always make us choose, don't you, and we women, we're such ninnies, we don't usually regret our choice.'

Marian smiled faintly as she rose and walked toward the piano. The grandmother watched her sit down and, pointing to a picture at one end of the room, cried abruptly, 'Do you see that portrait, young man?' It was of Marian as a young and beautiful woman, wearing a white taffeta evening gown with a brilliant blue sash, and the toes of blue slippers showing under the stiff hem of her skirt. She was sitting with her back to a black piano, one elbow on the keys, her head resting on her hand. 'That,' croaked the grandmother, 'is my daughter when she, like me before her, was on the very point of becoming a great, indeed a renowned, artist. And then, like me —' She laughed again, her harsh, theatrical laugh, and wagged her finger at Johnny once more. 'You men! You men!'

Johnny said, 'It's handsome.'

'Handsome?' she demanded. 'Of course! Marian was a very handsome woman, weren't you, my dear? And the artist, young man, was Sargent, a very great painter, as you no doubt know.' She turned to her daughter quickly and cried, 'Do you remember those sittings? You were just twenty. . . .'

'Yes,' Marian said, her eyes as slumbrous as if she were listening to the *Tristan* Prelude again. 'Yes, I remember. Sargent was an old man, and very witty, and he painted from a white palette. I remember he said that that explained the intensity of his colors.'

Gay, who had been looking from one to the other with shining eyes, cried, 'How could you *bear* to leave all that?'

Her voice was almost anguished, and Johnny turned his face away quickly.

Both women looked at her with silent benediction, and Dearest said, 'Let the child play.'

'Do, Gay,' Johnny said.

She flushed, looked at him swiftly, and said, 'Oh, no. Look, here's father.'

The headmaster was standing in the doorway, his thin shoulders stooped, his arms dangling at his sides. Johnny got to his feet.

'Sit down, sit down,' he said. 'Don't let me interrupt. Is the music finished?'

'*Tristan, Tristan!*' the grandmother sighed. 'I shall never have enough of it while I live.'

'Nor I!' cried Marian.

'Nor I!' cried Gay.

The headmaster, hesitating just inside the door, looked at the three of them and said, 'I thought Wagner had gone out of fashion.'

They looked up at him sharply. 'Fools!' snapped the grandmother, and Gay cried, 'Oh, father, don't be *silly!*'

They stared at him, and he said, 'I'm sorry. . . .'

Johnny faced the headmaster, his back squarely to the women. 'I must go,' he announced.

'Don't go, young man,' said Dearest.

'Oh, don't go,' said Marian.

'Stay a while!' Gay said casually.

Johnny, looking intently at the headmaster, did not turn. Finally, Mr. Baring said, 'Don't let me frighten you away.'

'Oh, no, sir, it's not that. . . .' he said.

'It's been very nice to see you,' said Marian.

'It cheers me to find a young man who's fond of music,' croaked Dearest.

'Come again, soon, Johnny,' Gay said.

'Thank you,' he answered, and went out.

Mr. Baring held the door open. 'Yes, do let us see more of you,' he said in a voice that sounded like something coming from the bottom of a well.

Johnny said, 'Thank you, sir,' loudly, and hesitated.

'I like to have the boys come in. Not many of you do.'

'Oh, sir,' Johnny started, 'we — I —' His voice broke, and he could hardly mumble, 'We think you're fine.'

'What was that?' Mr. Baring asked, smiling faintly.

Johnny drew a deep breath. 'Nothing, sir — I guess.' He plunged down the steps.

It was late afternoon, the sky was bright blue and streaked with saffron, the leaves were incredibly gay, the smell of smoke was sharp on the air, and the distant sounds of boys' voices came from the playing fields. Suddenly, he did not know what to do next.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and shuffled along the sidewalk, kicking through drifts of dead and rattling leaves. 'Damn,' he muttered, 'damn, damn, damn!' And finally, stopping dead in his tracks and looking up, 'God damn them!'



# 15

## *A Friend of the Family*

### I

#### PORTRAIT OF LADIES

IT WAS TWO O'CLOCK in the morning and the still brilliantly illuminated living room of Lotta Gordon's country house had a cold air of emptiness, which the three people in it did nothing to relieve. All the other guests had gone upstairs to bed, and the ladies, having a last drink together, had turned their backs on Mr. Payson, who, unaware of the affront, was resting stuporously with his chin fallen forward on the bulge of his shirt front, his eyes closed.

Mrs. Payson leaned forward. 'I must warn you, Lotta,' she said. 'In a moment he'll begin to snore. We'll try not to hear.'

'Our conversation is not stimulating, I should say.'

'Pay no attention to him,' Mrs. Payson said as she turned to look at her husband with glassy-eyed distaste.

Lotta sipped at her highball before she said, 'He drinks rather too much, doesn't he?'

Mrs. Payson nodded. 'Constantly in the country. And so it is a delight to find someone who will sit up after everyone else has gone to bed and be lucid with one.'

'Lucid?' Lotta repeated doubtfully.

'You *are* lucid, Lotta, you know.'

'Am I?'

'Oh, definitely!'

Lotta looked down into her glass and said, 'It was amusingly evident, just before he — went to sleep? — that a struggle was going on. His back so erect, eyes fixed on one small, stationary object or another, almost desperately.'

Mrs. Payson laughed. 'My dear, I know! He always loses.' She smiled and put her head back, arched her spine, and lifted her arms in a long stretch. 'Drinking, Lotta, is a refinement that should be reserved for the appreciative. Now I — I get the most delicious sensations. Sometimes almost of a submarine world. All movement becomes luxurious. Sometimes I seem to myself almost like a strange plant on the ocean floor.'

A sound broke from Mr. Payson, at first almost like a purr, but in a few moments stronger and louder until presently it had developed into an obvious and disturbing snore. Mrs. Payson did not turn to look at him, but Lotta's eyes moved ever so slightly until her cold glance fixed itself upon him.

'Do be still,' Mrs. Payson said sharply, without turning, and then, 'He destroys all loveliness.'

'Yes.'

'And now,' she said, 'now I must get him to bed!'

'We'll wake him —'

'*Wake* him? My dear, you don't know! You can't wake him. He's as good as dead now. Wake him, indeed! That isn't sleep, Lotta. That is a drunken stupor.'

'Yes,' said Lotta, 'so it is. What shall we do with him?'

Mrs. Payson put her head back and emptied her glass. Then she came to her feet, swaying slightly, and said, 'There's only one technique.'

'Let me call one of the servants,' Lotta said, rising too, and standing beside Mrs. Payson. In their long gowns they looked very tall, fragile, and very slim.

'We must not take advantage of him,' Mrs. Payson pointed out, and, glancing at him again, added, 'Unattractive jelly that he is!' A speculative silence followed upon her words

as they regarded him together. Finally Mrs. Payson said, 'No, there's only one technique. If urged, his feet will more or less work, so we shall not have to carry him, at any rate. We'll push him up the stairs. From the rear.'

'Oh.'

'To begin,' she went on crisply, 'we must each take hold of an arm and pull.'

They leaned over the figure in the chair and wrapped their long, sinuous arms round Mr. Payson's heavy ones, and, when Mrs. Payson signaled 'All right,' pulled. With a grunt which interrupted the snoring — indeed, ended it — Mr. Payson's ample body came to its feet.

'Walk!' Mrs. Payson ordered.

A kind of shudder passed through the sagging form, and then, feebly co-operative, the dragging feet moved along between the ladies' into the foyer and to the foot of the stairs.

'Now we rest,' said Mrs. Payson breathlessly.

Mr. Payson was let slowly down on his face, his head on the fourth step, his feet on the floor. Mrs. Payson stood against his shoes so that he would not slip down. Lotta, disheveled but hardly panting, leaned against the wall. Her hand, it seemed to Mrs. Payson, rose dreamily to her face as she said, 'Such a burden to you, dear.'

'I can't tell you, really.'

'Poor dumb thing,' Lotta said wearily.

'No pity!' Mrs. Payson warned her almost sharply. 'I haven't a shred of it, you know, not a shred! It's a sad admission, but' — and her arm went out in a languid arc until her hand pointed at him with limp accusation — 'I ask you, in all fairness, has he deserved it?'

'Poor dumb thing!'

'We'll have another highball,' Mrs. Payson said, 'once We've got him tucked away.' And more briskly, more brightly than she had yet spoken, 'Well, then, to work!'

With the efficiency of experience she bent swiftly to her

task. 'I get him up this way,' she said, encircling his torso with her arms, and, panting, pulled him up. 'Onto the banister, thus!'

With his chest flat against the broad marble banister, one arm flung over it, Mr. Payson seemed to rest comfortably. 'Now I'll need you, Lotta. He's really quite heavy, isn't he? We push now.'

She moved her arms until her hands were firmly planted against Mr. Payson's bottom, and Lotta arranged her hands similarly.

'Now!' cried Mrs. Payson.

Slowly Mr. Payson began to move up the stairs. Inch by inch his chest slid along the banister and his limp feet, reluctantly, with the ladies' feet just behind them so that they could not slip back, dragged themselves up, step by step.

'Save your strength for what's ahead,' Mrs. Payson admonished. 'A slow, steady pressure does wonders at this stage.'

Lotta, laughing a little, said, 'No one can know how much this has done for your figure.'

'No one,' Mrs. Payson said, 'can know the discipline to my spirit!'

The unsteady progress continued until, with a note of imminent triumph in her voice, Mrs. Payson called out, 'Gently, now! Gently! Just one more step!' And, 'There!'

With a quick movement she braced herself against the body. 'Up!' she commanded harshly as the feet threatened to slip. 'Up, now!' The feet obeyed and Mr. Payson, doubled over the top of the broad banister, became stationary. Lotta moved to a mirror and pushed her hair back from her face with languorous hands.

'Lotta, with your head raised that way, your neck — really, it's lovely.'

Lotta smiled and said, 'Let's finish. Your room, fortunately, is just there.'

'From here to that table, then on to the door,' Mrs. Payson said. 'Will you open it?'

Once more, with their arms wrapped round his, the ladies pulled Mr. Payson along between them, until, at the table, they let him down again. But the movement was too abrupt or Mr. Payson too heavy for the table, for instantly, without a warning creak, the table crashed under him and he fell headlong among the ruins of it, his head, after one thud, resting gently against the opened door of his own room, his body half across the threshold.

Mrs. Payson groaned, and Lotta, after one brief, unwilling glance at the spectacle, said, 'It's quite all right.'

'How too exasperating!'

'Look,' said Lotta then, 'don't you really think that one's always spending much too much time on drunkards, always trying to get them from where they are to where one thinks they should be? Why not leave him there? He's perfectly comfortable, you know.'

Mrs. Payson's face broke into smiles of pleasure. 'Lotta,' she said, 'you *are* lucid, you see! Just one moment.'

Stepping cautiously around Mr. Payson's head, she disappeared into their room for a moment and returned with a comforter. 'Or I'll be having to nurse him with a cold,' she explained, spreading it over the still form. The gentle introduction to his snoring had begun again, and Mrs. Payson listened to it for a moment before she straightened up and said, 'Now for our reward, our highball!'

Lotta started down the stairs, moving slowly, with infinite grace, her gown molded about her long legs and trailing behind her in exquisite folds. It seemed to Mrs. Payson that she moved like a figure in a slow dance or like vegetation in a submarine world.

Then Mr. Payson's purring broke again into the harsher snore, and suddenly Mrs. Payson swung around with repressed fury and stamped her long, narrow foot at him. 'Oh, *you!*' she cried.

PASTORALE

'He didn't *touch* his coleslaw,' said Mrs. Payson to Lotta Gordon, and both of them looked up from the ground before them, from the cloth on which the bowl of coleslaw stood fresh and incongruous, to glance at the figure of Mr. Payson recumbent against the trunk of an oak tree.

'Oh, well,' said Lotta cheerfully.

'But Lotta,' Mrs. Payson complained, 'I didn't want coleslaw for our picnic. He insisted. Lotta, *I* wanted an idyll.' And with a little gesture of despair, she indicated the half-dozen sheep grazing in the meadow beyond. 'It's the first opportunity those beasts of his have ever had to be of any earthly use.'

'It's lovely,' Lotta said comfortingly, 'and the creatures are very apt.'

'Not lovely enough,' said Mrs. Payson. 'This was to be my celebration of the season, Lotta!'

'And to think that he could have been the season's god today!' Lotta said.

'Precisely,' said Mrs. Payson, a little startled by the idea.

They were seated on the ground at the edge of the grove behind the Paysons' house, just where it joined the meadow in which Mr. Payson confined his sheep. The sun shone brightly in the meadow, but in the grove, where the new foliage on the trees glittered faintly, the shade was deep and green. The ladies sat on either side of the picnic cloth, which held the remnants of their luncheon — the ravished guinea fowl, the aspic collapsed among its garnishes, and two wine bottles, one of them empty; Mr. Payson, no longer of the party, reclined a few feet away.

'*He*,' said Mrs. Payson as she looked away from him with a slight shudder, 'he decided, of course, long before you ar-

rived, that he needed neither wine nor the wretched coleslaw for which he had clamored. He's been on whiskey now for hours.'

'There's something of the zealot in him, isn't there?' said Lotta with a thin smile, as she looked at the empty tumbler beside Mr. Payson in the grass.

Mrs. Payson looked at the sheep. Beyond the wooden fence, they seemed like little clouds which had settled on the grass they munched. 'I need a turn,' Mrs. Payson said, and then both ladies untwined their limbs, rose slowly, and began to weave toward the sheep.

'My dear,' Mrs. Payson said softly, 'I rather float!'

'Heady wine,' Lotta commented, floating beside her.

In the bright sunlight of the open expanse which skirted the grove, the ladies, drifting toward the fence, appeared remarkably tall and thin, but their fragile presence somehow alarmed the sheep, which looked up unanimously in sharp inquiry and moved together into a suspicious group.

'Why do they *huddle* so?' asked Mrs. Payson, leaning against a fence post.

'They're not accustomed to the attention of shepherdesses,' said Lotta.

Mrs. Payson glanced back at her husband where he slept against his tree. 'Shepherdesses, dear?' she said. 'Then what is he?'

Lotta, who had been poking with her pointed toe at some green vines which trailed along the ground below the fence, drew her foot back suddenly and, smiling, said, 'Your weary swain, of course.'

Mrs. Payson sighed 'Ah, me!' and then, with a sharp laugh, she cried 'Swain!' The sheep, startled, scattered suddenly and fled into a cluster of slim trees in the center of the meadow. 'Silly things,' said Mrs. Payson, a little flushed. 'Let's have a drink.'

'The rites of spring, by all means,' said Lotta, and they

swayed eagerly back to the cloth spread on the ground. While Mrs. Payson busied herself at a basket which stood open and conveniently near Mr. Payson's tree, he made a sudden indelicate sound, a grunt or a snore, and the ladies looked at him dubiously over their shoulders.

Lotta, taking her glass from Mrs. Payson, said, 'The swain is omitting nothing today, is he?' And at that moment, as if in reply, a second, sodden rumble from Mr. Payson's throat thrust itself upon the pleasant air.

'But he's so easy to live with,' Mrs. Payson said. 'You've no idea how relaxing he is.'

Lotta smiled and stretched her thin length tentatively along the ground as the solid rhythm of Mr. Payson's snoring broke steadily upon the air.

Mrs. Payson, sinking down to the grass beside Lotta, drank almost rapidly, but Lotta, resting her head on her slim hand, sipped at her highball with her usual impassivity. When she had almost emptied her glass, Mrs. Payson rose from the ground and stared at her husband. 'This air,' she said, 'whets my appetite astonishingly.' She turned to the meadow, where the sheep were nibbling their way near again. 'You know, we don't get out enough, Lotta. The earth, and all — we're hothouse things, I suppose, really, aren't we?'

Lotta said, 'Nonsense, my dear, we're the season's pretties.' Her eyes glittered with laughter.

'Spring,' exclaimed Mrs. Payson with soft-voiced reflection.

Lotta sat up and looked at her. 'My dear,' she said, 'didn't you speak of a rite to be performed?'

It was Lotta herself who had suggested a ceremony, but Mrs. Payson did not notice the imposition.

'So I did!' she said. 'A rite, yes. To the god.' She glanced at Mr. Payson. 'But what was it that they did, Lotta — the Greeks?'

'They crowned him, my dear, they crowned him,' Lotta said.

Mrs. Payson put down her empty glass. 'Dear swain,' she said, and patted the top of Mr. Payson's head. His sounds ceased and he moved a little under the impact. He lifted his knees, and then let them fall again, his legs stretched out once more straight before him. His toes pointed directly toward the sky. Mrs. Payson turned away from him and moved unsteadily about under the trees, searching the ground.

'Not a thing to weave with,' she said disconsolately, walking toward the fence. 'Not a thing here that one could use to make a proper crown.'

The sheep fled again as Mrs. Payson came near them, and Lotta, turning her head to watch, saw that her friend was supporting herself against a fence post with one hand, and plucking up greenery with the other. After a moment she came wavering back to the grove, her arms filled with vines.

Lotta sat up. 'What is that?' she asked.

'It's myrtle, I'm sure,' Mrs. Payson said, 'or laurel, or something of the sort. I've no idea, really, but won't it do beautifully?'

Lotta's quick glance darted to Mr. Payson's head, and she allowed herself a small shudder of delight. 'Oh, beautifully, darling. It's just right.'

Mrs. Payson made her way to her husband, and sinking to her knees before his upturned feet, she laid her green offering on his extended and unfeeling limbs. Then she began to separate the strands of vine and weave them into a crown.

'Do I look like his handmaiden?' she called merrily to Lotta.

Lotta found it difficult to speak. 'Indeed!' she cried. 'If only he could witness your loving care.'

'Wasted!' Mrs. Payson said, and she fixed together the ends of the garland she had made. 'There!' she exclaimed with satisfaction for her handiwork, and pressed the green wreath upon his moist brow.

Very slowly then, Mr. Payson's eyelids lifted and for a

moment his glazed eyes tried to comprehend the presence before him, but then, very slowly, the eyelids closed again and slowly the crowned head bowed.

Lotta, too weak to rise, too weak to lift her elegant body from the grass, turned her head and saw that the sheep were moving timorously toward the fence again. She let her eyes rest on the place where Mrs. Payson had, by such remarkable chance, found the poison ivy, and then, thinking of the Paysons' next day, she broke into exhausted little spasms of laughter.

### III

#### AN OLD LOVE

'The happy home!' said Lotta Gordon as she stepped into the Paysons' white drawing room that Sunday afternoon. She stood still for a moment, looking first at Mrs. Payson, in her lavender tea gown with its yards of chiffon draped round her, then at the defective whippet that lay on the floor beside her chair. Mrs. Payson's thin hand was dangling toward the dog's head. Mr. Payson sat oblivious in a chair near the small fire which burned decorously in the grate. On the table beside him were a half-emptied glass and the equipment for highballs.

'Lotta, how nice!' Mrs. Payson exclaimed.

'I'm on my way into town,' Lotta said.

'How pleasant of you to stop on your way. Sit here.' Mrs. Payson patted the place beside her on the blue satin sofa.

Lotta looked at Mr. Payson for a moment longer with that cold unconcern which almost never left her face, and then, languidly adjusting the half-dozen narrow furs which were wrapped about her neck and shoulders, came and sat down beside Mrs. Payson. The whippet raised its fragile head and sniffed the air.

‘Little martens, aren’t they?’ Mrs. Payson said. ‘They’re perfect for you! Never wear large furs, Lotta. It’s those delicious little *lank* things that truly become you.’

‘Thank you,’ Lotta said. ‘How have you been? And — Mr. Payson?’ She looked toward him inquiringly. His head was resting on his chest and his legs were stretched out before him.

‘Do not mention the situation,’ Mrs. Payson admonished. ‘I’ve become quite accustomed to these charming Sunday afternoons at home in the country. Only occasionally do I still wish that he could get through until supper. Let’s sit over there.’

They rose, and the whippet clattered to its feet on the bare floor and tapped after them with its limping gait. They sat down again on a sofa which faced the windows, their backs firmly turned on Mr. Payson, who was, as it were, alone then in the room by the little fire. ‘Now let us forget about him,’ Mrs. Payson said.

‘But he’s making some sort of noise,’ Lotta said. ‘As if he were trying to say something.’

Mr. Payson was making a series of small, grunting sounds, but he had not raised his head.

‘Pure habit, my dear, pure habit,’ said Mrs. Payson, and then, after a pause, ‘Do you know, I’ve met an old love of his.’

Vague animation stirred in Lotta’s eyes. ‘Tell me,’ she said. ‘Who?’

Mrs. Payson produced the name with an air of restrained triumph. ‘Vanessa Park.’

Lotta looked searchingly upward for a moment and then asked, ‘The writer?’

‘Isn’t it marvelous?’

‘Tell me,’ Lotta said again, and this time rather hurried to find a cigarette in her bag, lit it, and sank back quickly to listen.

Mr. Payson’s muttering, somewhat more insistent now,

broke the momentary silence, and the women glanced over their shoulders at him and quickly away again. Then suddenly the whippet clambered to its feet and trotted into the middle of the room. It stood quite far from Mr. Payson and looked at him, its haunches quivering.

‘Come back, Molly,’ Mrs. Payson ordered, and the dog came back to her.

‘Poor Molly,’ Mrs. Payson said, and let her hand run idly along the dog’s lank side. The dog put its long head in Mrs. Payson’s lap for a moment, its thin legs trembling.

‘About the old love,’ Lotta prompted.

‘To be sure! He announced abruptly one night not long ago that he had been lunching with her. “Vanessa Park?” I said. “You *know* her?” “Oh, yes,” said he. “But when? When?” I said. “How fascinating!” I learned then that they had known each other somewhere once and have never quite lost touch — you know the sort of rather messy thing. He has all her books on his shelves. I didn’t discover it until after he told me about her. Whenever she comes to town, which is about twice a year, they arrange to meet — to talk, I suppose, about the good old *days!*’

‘Intrigue,’ Lotta said. ‘I hadn’t suspected.’

‘Nor, of course, had I. Not that it’s really intrigue,’ Mrs. Payson added, ‘or I shouldn’t have insisted that she come for dinner, which, you see, I did, being, I admit, really vulgarly curious. But you can see — I mean, one would be.’

Lotta put her head back and laughed silently. ‘Of course!’ she cried. ‘How did it go?’

‘I dressed in a rather frilly thing, but she, Lotta, she came directly from a library, where she had been all day, came loaded down with notebooks and papers and a map! A great roll under her arm, heaven knows why. The idea did not strike me as particularly creative. And looking quite grubby, in a plain little suit, and her hair rather a mess.’

Lotta shifted her furs and let the toe of her narrow shoe

just touch the ear of the whippet, which quivered even as it lay at their feet.

'Not only was I made to feel giddy, Lotta,' Mrs. Payson continued, 'but I acted it. I was quite overcome by the spectacle of my good man — the interest, the animation, such restraint with the liquor, and, most startling, the wealth of utterly unsuspected information on matters literary.'

'Really?'

'It was definitely not my show.'

'Shurlug glaw,' said Mr. Payson rather loudly behind them.

'Please,' said Mrs. Payson, only half turning her head. And once more the whippet rose and went to look at Mr. Payson.

'Come away, Molly,' said Mrs. Payson.

The whippet gazed at her over its narrow shoulder and came back. Then it stood looking out of the windows, at the meadows and the still-barren trees. The thin sunlight made its white coat gleam and cast faint shadows along its sides, where the fragile bones showed through its short hair. Its long neck was lifted and the little head alertly raised, and all the time its haunches quivered. Then suddenly its long, thin legs folded up under it and it rested once more at the feet of its mistress.

Lotta looked into her bag for another cigarette. 'Tell me more about her,' she said.

'I quite liked her,' said Mrs. Payson reflectively. 'Although it was obvious, of course, that she loathed *me* and that she is a little lightheaded about my provider still. But I quite liked her. She has an air, of sorts. I felt real admiration for her, or at least as much as she would allow me to feel.'

'She was friendly?'

'Yes, but rather in the way that God would be. So that I kept saying such silly things. Sickening things, really. How wonderful it must be to write books, for instance. "How fortunate you college women are!" I said.'

Lotta smiled, and Mr. Payson repeated, 'Shurlug glaw.' 'You're quite certain?' Lotta asked, glancing over her shoulder.

'Stiff,' said Mrs. Payson. 'No sensation whatever, you know.'

Molly raised her head from where it rested in a pool of lavender chiffon on the floor and blinked quickly at Mr. Payson.

'She said that she had read so much in preparation for a new book that her brain was utterly addled. Lotta, I heard myself giggle like a girl and say, "Oh, Miss Park, you should do as I do. I never read." And she looked at me and said, "Don't you really?" Now, of course I read. I read quite a lot. What prompted me to say that?'

Lotta's voice was faint with mirth. 'Oh, my dear!' she said.

'At one point — but this was after several highballs — when he was talking about her first book, I said, "How depressing, Miss Park, to think that while you were doing that I was spending a whole year on coming out!" and instantly could have fled. I had no intention of saying that, Lotta. Why did I?'

Lotta stirred.

'She looked at me like a sad Minerva, and, as if I had said nothing at all, asked, "What did you do before your marriage? I mean, what sort of work?"'

Lotta closed her eyes and laughed without making a sound. 'My dear,' she said, 'the woman sounds impossibly thick. I should have said the same things.'

'Oh, no, not you, Lotta,' Mrs. Payson said. 'You are really composed. You are a profoundly composed woman.'

Wearily, as if the narrative had rather exhausted her, she rose then and said, 'Let *us* have a drink.' She walked across the room toward Mr. Payson, with her chiffon veils fluttering

gently round her, and the whippet made its staccato sounds on the bare floor. Lotta rose too, moved her little furs about her neck, and followed. The dog stopped at a good distance from Mr. Payson's chair and regarded him with its remote glance. Mrs. Payson, mixing highballs, was bending over the table beside Mr. Payson's chair. Mr. Payson continued oblivious, his head back, his eyes closed, his feet out before him. Lotta looked down at him from what would have seemed great height if he had opened his eyes.

'Shlooks liker gaw,' Mr. Payson said.

'He is troubled by a dream,' Lotta said. 'I am sure of it.'

'Nonsense, my dear,' said Mrs. Payson as she handed her a glass. They stood above him, looking down. 'There is no sensation whatever.'

The whippet clattered cautiously up behind them and leaned against Mrs. Payson. She let her fingers creep about its throat and feel the taut cords that stretched under its skin. Then she caressed the delicate skull and gently pulled at the pointed ears.

'After she left, Lotta,' she said at last, still looking down at Mr. Payson, 'he asked me how I liked her, and I said, "Oh, very much." "Do you?" he said. "Yes," I said, "I do. If only she would let me like her more. But she is so belligerent about doing the world's work — it brings out the very worst in me. Everything I said tonight was absurd, and I'm quite annoyed with myself." And then, my dear, he looked at me in a way that rather turned me cold, and he said, "I wish you were, I wish that I could think you really were."'

Lotta gave her silent laugh again and the whippet raised its small head from among the lavender folds of Mrs. Payson's gown and looked at Lotta inquiringly. Then Mr. Payson's feet moved and his relaxed hands twitched on the arms of his chair.

'Shlooks liker gaw,' he said.

'He's making an effort,' Lotta said.

Mr. Payson *was* making an effort. His hands gripped the arms of the chair, his feet drew in, his head straightened. He could not, apparently, open his eyes, but with almost desperate clarity he said at last what had been troubling him all the while. He said, 'She looks like 'r dog.'

Lotta began to laugh aloud. She laughed with little hoots of mirth, and a tiny shriek, and her shoulders shook so violently for a moment that the furs about her neck suddenly looked like little live things.

*Mr. Penny's Vision*

AT LAST Willard Penny even read Gregory Marvin's book of poems. He gave the better part of an evening over to it, and when he snapped the thin volume shut after he had read the last lyric, he did it with a kind of triumphant dispatch, and went to bed feeling very fine indeed. For now, more than ever, he was convinced that Marvin was the merest egotist, such an unbalanced poseur that he did not deserve a rational man's attention, much less his impatience. He lay in bed and planned his lecture for the next morning, outlined in his mind a preliminary talk on Milton's early poems, and was annoyed that a line from Marvin's book should now and again come bouncing into his brain.

He had been formulating his opening paragraph: Ladies and gentlemen — the early poems of John Milton are of inestimable importance to the formation of a true idea of the poet's temperament. So different are these verses from the poems he was to produce in his later years that it is difficult to believe they came from the same pen. Take, as an example, the famous lines from 'L'Allegro.' . . . And then, for no reason, he was quoting to himself that frightful line from Marvin:

. . . heroes' feet

Washed by dreaming women's hands . . .

Take, as an example, the famous lines from 'L'Allegro' . . .  
*heroes' feet!*

Damn the man! he thought, and skipped ahead in his lec-

ture: To know Milton, really, we must look carefully into those days he spent at Cambridge, those days in which he was unkindly nicknamed 'the lady of Christ's.' Do his writings of this period indicate that he was indeed what that name implies? Take, as an example, this early sonnet . . . *heroes' feet, heroes' feet, heroes' feet* . . . or has the bulk of Milton criticism generally misunderstood the real nature of the man . . . *heroes' feet, washed by dreaming women's hands* . . .

Great God! Only Marvin could have written such a line, and only Marvin would have had the tastelessness to publish it. And addressed, no doubt, to his wife, poor creature! The insufferable arrogance!

He rolled back and forth on his bed and tried with desperate concentration to keep Milton in mind. You will find in the *Epistles* to Diodati a characteristic spirit of youthfulness and amiability; likewise, in certain of the early sonnets you cannot escape . . . *heroes' feet* . . . *dreaming women's hands* . . . *heroes' feet*.

Later he drowsed off, between twisted sheets, on a hot pillow.

Willard Penny looked like a dried-up little man of sixty or more, but he was only forty-six. During the last twenty years, besides lecturing on English literature, he had made three trips abroad and had published a small collection of essays on the religious poets of the seventeenth century. With bald head, scraggly mustache, oxford glasses tipsy on the long bridge of his nose, and chin retreating into a wrinkled collar, the picture was not auspicious. In the company of strangers he was overcome with timidity, and even among his closest colleagues he was shy, and so he lived almost entirely to himself.

Except for two gestures toward matrimony, his existence had been singularly free of romantic adventure. In his youth he had made inarticulate love to a classmate who had finally

chosen to devote her life to social service. Much later, not without fear and trembling, he had proposed to the widow of a colleague who, after some hesitation, assured him that she would always think of him with fondness and then, rather too promptly, married the baseball coach. Ever since, Mr. Penny had restricted his devotions to teaching and to literature. By the time he reached forty, he no longer had the inclination to look beyond them.

Only Gregory Marvin had seriously and consistently broken in on his content. It was unfortunate that they were members of the same department in the University, for that, of course, brought the poet to the attention of Mr. Penny almost every day. Gregory Marvin, although he, too, was in his forties and a teacher of English literature, was wholly different from Mr. Penny. He was tall and lean, and had a rugged, browned face. His hair was thick and iron-gray, and it flowed back from his high forehead like the mane of an animal. He dressed meticulously and affectedly, with his shirt open at the neck and his collar brought outside his coat, or with a flowing scarf tied in a bow as a cravat, and he wore no hat. He, too, had produced a critical work, entitled *The Romantic Fulfillment*. He conducted himself with a disregard for academic convention which marked him as a poet, even a prophet; and, being a loquacious individual, he did not hesitate to speak what was on his mind to anyone who cared to listen. He was an experimenter in verse and a liberal in politics.

His life had never been orthodox. At an early age he had revolted against the traditions of his respectable family and gone to sea. Later he had subjected himself to an education and then, before the prospect of teaching, had become successively a cab driver, the conductor of a Rocky Mountain tour, the founder of a magazine in Prague, and the proprietor of an advanced bookshop on Eighth Street in New York. When the bookshop failed he was in his early thirties and,

perhaps because some of his energy had subsided, he settled down to two years of graduate work. Finally, in spite of earlier vows, he accepted an appointment as lecturer in romantic poetry. Since then he had been married three times and publicly in love at least thirty.

There was nothing about him that Willard Penny did not seem to despise. Marvin was a man of supreme self-confidence, who clearly felt that his life and his personality and his poems marked him off from the crowd as a man of unusual endowment. Penny thought his life merely undisciplined, his personality obnoxious, and his poems maudlin, insufferably egotistical and technically atrocious. For twenty years Mr. Penny had sat ill at ease and wordless through innumerable faculty meetings, and for ten years Gregory Marvin had not let a meeting pass at which he had not found something to say. What is more, his audience listened. Perhaps that more than anything else irritated Mr. Penny — that anyone *should* listen! He sometimes thought with satisfaction that the girls rather than the men in Marvin's classes found him marvelous. Likewise, the wives of his colleagues rather than his colleagues themselves listened to him with rapt attention. Surely, Mr. Penny thought, something innate in every man must be revolted by the qualities of his mind and by the flavor of his personality. And yet, there was the evidence of the faculty meetings: men did listen to Gregory Marvin.

So for ten years Willard Penny's life was tintured by this hate for a man he knew only from a distance. Often he laughed at himself, told himself that it was ridiculous to allow the man, who was, after all, of infinite unimportance, to vex him. And yet, when he next encountered him in the corridor towering above a cluster of admiring females, waving his hands in the air while he expostulated on the characteristics of Byronism or the political principles of Shelley, Mr. Penny would scurry into his office, slam the door behind him, and sit down at his desk in a trembling frenzy of rage that he could not overcome for hours.

By the end of the day he would have forgotten again, or would have laughed himself into a better mood and then, likely as not, he would meet the Marvins on his way to dinner. (They *always* seemed to be walking the streets!) And seeing them together enraged him more, if that was possible, than seeing Marvin alone. The fashion in which they walked represented for Mr. Penny not only the relationship between Marvin and his wife but the whole relationship which Marvin thought that he had established with the rest of the world. Perhaps it was because the poet walked so fast that his wife could not keep up with him, or perhaps it was as an actual expression of her humility that she walked quietly, a few paces behind him. Whatever the reason, the sight threw Mr. Penny into such a fury that, meeting them thus, he would clench his fists so tightly in his pockets that his nails left marks in the palms of his hands. The arrogant oaf striding ahead, with head thrown up and hair and tie flowing back, and that docile creature, his wife, hurrying along lest she fall too far behind, her head lowered so that she hardly saw the people who passed. This was the epitome of Marvin's character, and what Mr. Penny felt on such occasions, the very essence of his outrage.

And then, on one fine winter afternoon, Mr. Penny closed his books, secured himself against the weather in rubbers, muffler, overcoat, hat and earmuffs, and started out on a long walk. He went out of the town by way of the campus and was presently surrounded by winter fields, and he was happy. All the way, the opening stanzas of Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' sang themselves through his mind:

It was the winter wild  
While the Heaven-born child  
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies . . .

He thought that some day he would publish an anthology of

Christmas verse, and this poem would have first place. He walked along swiftly, and took pleasure in the crunch of his feet on the crusted snow, in the wind that blew into his face, in the bent branches of trees fabulously spangled with ice. He almost sang the words of the poem:

No war or battle's sound  
Was heard the world around.  
The idle spear and shield . . .

And as he turned at last to make his way back to the town, a mood for work was suddenly upon him, and he hurried, lost now in thoughts of the paper on Milton's debt to the *Metaphysicals* which he would begin that very afternoon.

He was crossing the campus again, planning his essay, storing away in his mind phrases that he could use and illustrations from the poems; and then, as he was passing the skating rink, a flying figure on the ice caught his eye, and he looked up out of his reverie to see Marvin and his wife alone on the rink, the poet cutting and recutting a figure eight, and his wife, standing still on her skates, watching him. A purple muffler sailed behind him as he skated, and his feet cut across the ice with marvelous precision and grace. Willard Penny suppressed a groan and then, almost unwillingly, stopped to watch. In an instant he had forgotten all about his paper.

The skater slowly came to a stop before his wife and, seeing Penny, waved to him.

'Hello, Penny!' he called. 'Fine afternoon, what?'

Mr. Penny smiled unhappily. 'Yes . . . fine,' he called back.

Mrs. Marvin looked up and smiled at him for an instant before she looked back to her husband. She said something to him, and he looked away from Penny and down at her, and the smile went from his face. The wife suddenly looked down at her shoes, and for what seemed to be some time they stood in that attitude, the poet tall, colorful, his bare, gray head sharp against the blowing, purple scarf, and the woman

small before him, a rather drab figure with her mittened hands folded across her breast and her head bent so that Penny saw the white curve of her neck above the fur collar of her skating jacket.

What Penny was thinking at that moment, he did not know, and in another instant he was thinking nothing at all, for it was then that an outrageous thing occurred. Suddenly the world had changed, and where there had been snow and ice and bare trees, there was now a green meadow studded with brilliant flowers, great leafy trees around it, and above, in place of the leaden winter sky, a fabric of blue such as he had never seen on a summer's day. And in the middle of the meadow, where the skaters had been standing, there were two figures still, but naked. One, a tall, magnificently formed man with a straight, brown body and a noble face, and the other, worshipping, a woman, soft and lovely and gleaming white, her breasts lifted in her hands like an offering, and her head bent in complete surrender. The slope of her shoulders and the arch of her neck were eloquent with adoration before the overwhelming pride and strength and beauty in the body of the man.

In an instant the vision was gone, and the world was of snow and ice again, and the two people on the rink were properly clothed once more and were suddenly circling and recircling on the ice with incredible speed and grace. A late afternoon wind blew into Mr. Penny's face, and he shivered. But the sensation he had experienced in his vision, that what he saw was essentially and terribly *right* — that lingered for a moment, and with it a glow of admiration. Then these faded, and he discovered that his rancor had gone too, and as he started up the street toward his lodging house, bewildered by the unprecedented thing that had happened to him, he knew that Gregory Marvin could never seem the same again. But what was much more disturbing, he, Willard Penny, could never possibly seem again the same to himself. And afterward, it was always that fact which outraged him.



## I7

### *A Little Door*

**D**O YOU KNOW,' Mrs. Herman said, 'that we are probably looking directly at Lisbon?' Her daughter and her son-in-law were sitting on the beach beside her, but even when she spoke to them she did not take her melancholy eyes from the point where the pale-blue Atlantic joined the pale-blue sky. 'Lisbon,' she said, 'a little door toward which half the population of a continent crowds, or yearns to.' She spoke with a husky, forensic flourish, like an old-school actress.

Eve Abrams, sensing her mother's mood, gave a snort of impatience and called to her children. The children paid no attention. At the edge of the water, Dickie was pursuing little Evvie with a long streamer of kelp switching behind him. 'Jellyfish!' he was crying. 'Jellyfish!'

Harold Abrams stood up and said, 'I'll get them, Eve,' and trotted off.

It was late in September and the beach was as empty as the sea. There was an offshore breeze, but under the dune where Mrs. Herman now sat alone with her daughter the air was still and the sunlight mellow. The tide was in, and the sea between the two great rocky arms reaching out from either end of the long beach, was almost quiet. At the shore the water was motionless; only at the base of a great, black rock which jutted from the water a hundred yards out did it move tirelessly, in small, foamless, slapping waves. Iron-gray at the shore, it soon softened to amethyst, then to turquoise, and

then, limitlessly, to the soft, burning blue which was almost identical with the color of the sky.

Mrs. Herman pushed her hands into the sand on either side of her and let it drain through her thin, white fingers. 'Lisbon,' she said. 'Think of it! That one little outlet for the millions who long to pass through. The enormous *aching*.'

Eve opened the picnic basket and said, 'We're going to eat now. Try not to be gloomy, please, when the children are with us.'

Mrs. Herman shifted her eyes. She glanced at her daughter, who looked very handsome kneeling there against the dune. Eve had on red sharkskin slacks and a yellow blouse. A yellow ribbon kept her black hair on top of her head in a casual and becoming pile. Mrs. Herman smiled bitterly and said, 'Poor Eve. The sky could fall ——'

'Nonsense. I'm as aware of things as you are.' Eve said. 'But there's no point, Mother, in *all the time* ——'

'No, Eve. I know you too well. The sky could really fall and you'd try to save your china.'

'That's ridiculous! I simply don't believe that there's any point in burdening children, or adults, for that matter, with perpetual gloom. I feel it as much as you. Everyone does.'

Mrs. Herman's pale lips twitched. 'It is not a matter of burdening or not burdening ourselves. We are burdened.' She stood up and pointed with a thin arm. 'Form a picture of Europe in your mind. Try to see it. That one open port. The few airplanes and the few ships, the money it costs, and the impossible number of people, and the terrible difficulties. See it as a picture, and you may feel it — all of Europe, and all the roads crowded, and all leading there. In spirit if not in body. All crowding down, or yearning to. That longing means nothing to you. It's only an idea, all of it, only something that you read about. But you're young.'

Now that Mrs. Herman was standing, the wind blew the light silk material of her white dress and made it flutter.

'Sit down,' Eve said. 'You're getting sand on the cloth.'

'There it is, exactly what I mean. Sand on the cloth!'

'Well, Mother, we've got to live, after all!' Eve cried impatiently.

The old woman raised her eyebrows, curiously heavy and dark for her delicate and bony face. Her white forehead wrinkled. 'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, we must.' Her voice had taken on the excessively rational tone of one who is explaining something to himself. 'My great-grandfather lived until he was a hundred and eight.'

'Oh *dear*, Mother!' Eve groaned, and once more shook out the blue-and-white checkered cloth. 'Now sit down, for heaven's sake, or go and help Harold bring back the children.'

But there was no need; Harold and the children were nearly back. The wind ballooned out the back of Harold's shirt and plastered his linen slacks against his legs. The children covered their eyes with their hands and bent their naked, brown bodies forward against a peppering of fine sand. For a moment the three of them stood still, and then, as the wind dropped, Harold picked up the little girl and said, 'Come on, Dick,' and joined the others under the dune.

'Wind's rising,' he said, and looked up at the sky. On the northern horizon puffy white clouds were forming and the color of the ocean had undergone a subtle change.

'I got sand in my eyes,' Evvie cried.

'Here, baby,' Eve said, and put down the paper plates. She found her handkerchief and said, 'Lie back and close your eyes.' She rubbed the child's lids gently. 'Now sniff.'

Evvie sniffed and blinked her eyes tentatively.

'Better?' Eve asked.

'Yes,' Evvie said.

Dickie said scornfully, 'She's scared of those old jellyfish.'

'They're not jellyfish,' Evvie said.

'They are *so*!' he cried vehemently.

'Sit down, both of you,' Eve said. 'We're going to have lunch.'

'Both my father and mother lived until they were ninety,' Mrs. Herman said abruptly. 'I'm only sixty-five. It's very depressing.'

They all stared at her, and Eve said sharply, 'What do you want, Mother? Chicken or ham sandwich?'

'Either, please,' she said, and then, turning to Evvie with sudden tenderness, she said, 'Come here, dear. Sit next to me.' When the little girl had settled down beside her, Mrs. Herman, holding her sandwich up to her mouth, said, 'You're right. They're not jellyfish but just some kind of seaweed. A plant. Don't let him tease you.'

'I know it,' Evvie said, and looked at Dickie calmly.

The Abramses all had very black hair and brilliant black eyes. Mrs. Herman's hair, though gray, was still streaked with black. Her eyes were dull. Yet now, as they ate their lunch looking out at the ocean, it was her eyes which seemed to see most. She looked across the water with steady concentration, as if she were trying to draw the outlines of that city, the door to freedom, out of the vast Atlantic distance.

'Look, Dickie,' Eve said. 'That rock out there is shaped like an elephant, isn't it?'

'Without a trunk,' Dickie said.

'Oh, but don't you see that line on this end, down the front of it? That's the trunk.'

'Elephant Rock,' Dickie said. 'Let's call it Elephant Rock.' Then, gulping down his milk, he tossed the paper cup in the air and scrambled up the side of the dune. Sand scattered through the air.

'Dick!' his father shouted. 'Watch what you're doing!'

Dickie, perched above them on the crest of the dune, looked down at Evvie meaningfully and began to chant, 'I'm the king of the cas-tle and you're the dir-ty ras-cal.'

Evvie stared up at him, finished her milk precisely, put down her cup, said 'Pooh!', and, turning her back, marched to the shore.

Dickie, trying his tune once more without effect, scrambled from the dune and followed her. 'There's a lion!' he shouted, pointing at the empty beach, and they ran wildly down the shore, both screaming, 'Lion! Lion!'

'Each generation dies off a little earlier,' Mrs. Herman said. 'There is that much, anyway. Their vitality seems to diminish. My great-grandfather — the one who had the bank in Prague — he was, as I said, one hundred and eight. My grandfather — the first of our family in this country — he was ninety-seven. My own father lived to be ninety and my mother eighty-nine.'

'They were very chipper old people,' Harold said. He had taken off a sneaker and was emptying the sand from it.

Eve lit a cigarette. 'That's a magnificent heritage. What are you lamenting about, for heaven's sake?' She flipped the dead match away impatiently.

'They were a burden to us,' Mrs. Herman said. 'Old people always are. But that is nothing. Think what a burden they were to themselves! How *they* must have ached sometimes ——'

'Look where the children have gone,' Eve said.

They were far up the beach. 'They're all right,' Harold said. 'Don't worry about them.'

'It may storm, and it's getting chilly,' Eve said, as she dug into a bathing kit, 'and their swimming suits are damp.' She found two sweaters and started up the beach.

'... yet they were spared these later horrors, at least,' Mrs. Herman said.

'The tide's going out,' Harold said.

Along the shore, where the water had receded, was a strip of wet sand, and small, white-capped waves were beginning to roll in. At the rock the slapping sounds had changed to long, low thumpings. The clouds on the northern horizon had fanned up and turned gray, and the water was dark green and purple but still glinting with sunlight.

'It's going to storm,' Harold said.

'My husband's family is very different,' Mrs. Herman said. 'Most of them die comfortably in their sixties, the way he did.'

'We'd better get packed up,' Harold said. 'Look at that water now.'

'What a strange thing!' Mrs. Herman said. 'Here the tide rolls out, and I suppose that means that on the other side it is rolling in. That brings us very close, doesn't it? I never saw Lisbon. I was never in Portugal. I have been abroad seven times and I've seen many countries. I counted them once. I've been in twenty-three countries.'

'Portugal was never much of a place to go, was it?' Harold said, putting the picnic things into the basket and making a pile of the scraps on a piece of newspaper. He looked down the beach at the three figures coming back. Then he glanced at the sky. The sun had abruptly and altogether vanished.

'But now it's everything,' Mrs. Herman said. 'The only door. A little, narrow door, and behind it millions of lives that can't possibly squeeze through it, ache as they may.'

'We're going to have to hurry,' Harold said. Mrs. Herman sat still, her legs stretched out before her, the toes of her black oxfords pointing awkwardly toward the sky.

'We'll have to hurry, won't we?' Eve said as she came up with the children. They were wearing their sweaters.

'Yes,' Harold said. 'Everything's nearly ready.'

'We'll put your shoes and socks on in the car, children,' Eve said.

Dickie bit his lower lip. 'You said we could dig clams when the tide went out,' he complained to his father.

'I want a starfish,' said Evvie.

'Some other day, babies,' Eve said firmly. She folded the cloth and put it quickly into the basket. 'Come on, Mother.'

Mrs. Herman stood up slowly. 'Listen to the sound from the rock,' she said.

With the rising wind, the waves were much higher and the thumping on the rock had changed to a distant booming, like remote thunder, or cannon.

Harold said, 'It sounds far away, doesn't it, as though it's from the horizon somewhere, not from that rock at all?'

'Yes,' Mrs. Herman said.

'It's because the wind's from the shore,' Harold said.

'Let's go,' said Eve, nervously. 'Look at that sky. We'll be caught.'

She took both children by the hand and hurried them up a dim path in the sand between the dunes. Harold picked up the basket and the kit and followed her. Mrs. Herman looked down at the parcel of scraps, which he had ignored, and listened for a moment longer to the waves on the rock.

On the dunes, the colors, under the lowering green sky, were curiously intense. The fading gorse was blotched with orange and a poisonous green, and a clump of red bushes was as vivid as blood. Eve's clothes, although she was far ahead, were as bright and sharp as if she were only a few steps away. She was carrying one child now and dragging the other behind her, and she was running as if their very lives depended on reaching the car before the rain began. Harold paused to look back, but after signaling to Mrs. Herman, he hurried after his wife. Mrs. Herman did not hurry. She lowered her head a little against the flying sand and trudged along comfortably. Even when the first heavy raindrops splattered down from the dark sky, she continued to walk as though it did not matter in the least if she were caught in the full torrent which would break loose any moment now.

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# I8

## *Memorandum: 1938-1942*

**G**EORG LESSING was a quiet, middle-class Austrian in his late fifties — not a man you would notice on the street and certainly not a man you would suppose destined for heroic action — who had escaped from Europe with his wife in 1938; and they could have lived here in modest comfort for the rest of their lives. Yet he is that Lessing whose execution, accompanied by so much brutal ceremony, figured prominently in the Nazi news releases about a month ago.

Of the melodrama — by what incredible means he managed to get from New York to Vienna in the year 1942 — I have no more information than the newspapers. They had only the official release — that Lessing, an exile in the United States, had succeeded in coming back into Austria and, by careful plotting, managed to shoot six officials, two of them very prominent, from a garret in which he was hiding as their cars drove through the street below; that it was an extraordinary display of marksmanship for a middle-aged professor whose eyes were none too good; and that he was of course immediately arrested and the Reich revenged. According to the interview of our reporters with Frau Lessing in New York, which was published the next day, I found that she had known of his plan and that he had, in going, accepted death. She said that he had been gone for over five months before the news came and that she had heard nothing from him once he had left. She said he felt that his nerves were shattered, that

very soon he would be of no use whatever and that he must do something while he could. But how much of his plan had he revealed to his wife? the reporters had pressed her. And how long had he been forming it? She was very indefinite; but twice she quoted him — and the repetition seems significant — as saying, 'One sees one's *duty*, at least, *nicht wahr?*' With that curious accent on duty, as if one saw nothing else. And she said too, 'The sense of duty, it can grow from very *personal* things, is it not so?'

Then I remembered. I am certain now that Lessing's plan was in the making for nearly four years and I am certain that that *personal* thing underneath his boldness and cunning and the whole extraordinary adventure is so prosaic an item as a pair of spectacles. Not that the Lessings did not have larger motives; their son, because of the Nazis, had been trapped in Turkey for years, and their daughter, with her husband, had vanished in France in 1940. Yet I am sure of the spectacles. What trivial details ultimately underlie the exaltations of humanity comprise, after all, the whole mystery of ourselves. I had seen how important Lessing's spectacles were to him; his only symbol of security, perhaps, in a world that had grown dark and confused and trackless around him; and I had seen him, too, in that moment later when his gray sadness fell from him like old clothes — the bright plot suddenly complete in his mind — and he as radiant as a boy who is about to have everything he has dreamed of.

I should say that I saw the Lessings only a few times all together, and that was in 1938. In September of that year they went to Saint Paul and stayed there for three years, until Herr Lessing's nerves got the better of him and he could not keep his teaching position there. Then they came back to New York, and he had been doing well as an adviser on iconography in one of the museums. After I read of his death I tried to get in touch with Frau Lessing, but she had already vanished from her basement apartment in Jones Street, and

the Manhattan police have not yet found any trace of her. Has she, plump and nearsighted, gone off on some such secret errand as her husband's, as inappropriately magnificent and bold? Or, more likely, is she dead, a woman whose life has been systematically robbed of every love, an anonymous suicide in some brown river of the city?

The spectacles take us back to an automobile drive on a very hot day in late August of 1938. In the back seat, my wife and the Herr Doktor had immediately launched into their reminiscences, but I had not known these people before, and so, at first, there seemed only one subject for Frau Lessing and me to discuss. She felt this, clearly, and while her husband was soberly, even sadly, talking of the past, she took a very bright tone with me about the present.

'You know,' she said as soon as we had started, 'it is rather amusing to change your country. We find it quite amusing.'

'So?' I asked dubiously.

'Oh, yes,' she said lightly, 'for very young people and for old people, it is quite amusing to make — what do you say? — yes, *drastic* moves. For people of your age, with small children, and a home just starting, it is difficult, but for very young and for old people, it is ——' she groped for the word, 'ah, *stimulating*. You say stimulating, yes?' She was quite nearsighted and she blinked at me through the thick lenses of her glasses.

'Yes,' I said. 'Stimulating.'

My wife had known these people when they had a large house on a shady street in the outskirts of Vienna, with several Utrillos on their walls, a famous Matisse and a portrait of the two of them seated on a sofa, by their friend Kokoschka. I believe that Mrs. Lessing's grandmother on her father's side had been a Jewess, and Georg Lessing, a distinguished art historian in the University of Vienna, had inevitably had occasions on which to express publicly his mildly liberal

views. New York in that summer, and constantly being with other exiles, had depressed them, and so they came to Cambridge in August. Cambridge, as they found at once, is expensive and by no means cool, and we suggested that, since rest was what they wanted, they let us help them find rooms in the country. They had more than a month before Herr Lessing had to go to Saint Paul.

We had not discussed places with them but had decided to drive them to Annisquam first. Then Mrs. Lessing, looking at a bleak row of Cambridge three-deckers as we crept toward Highway 1A through snarls of traffic, said, 'It is the green that I want — just the green to look at.'

'Yes, grass,' said Herr Lessing, whose English was more fluent than his wife's. 'Not the ocean, but grass.'

'No, not water, but the resting green, the grass.'

'How about Topsfield?' my wife said.

'We might try Topsfield,' I said.

So we turned into the traffic on Route 1.

'It is only your hat shops,' Frau Lessing said, 'that I cannot like.'

'Women's hats are awful right now,' I said tritely.

'Oh, not the styles,' she said quickly. 'The styles I like fine. No, no. I mean I cannot get a hat to fit me. You see, I have a very big head.' She laughed.

'Oh, come,' I said, 'any large shop could give you your size.'

'Yes? Yes?' she cried in scorn. '*Aber nein!* Not even so the very largest.'

'You couldn't get your size anywhere, really?'

'No. I could get nothing anywhere.' Then she said, 'Only this dress — yes, this. You like it?' It was a casual dress, for the country, of hopsacking, I believe, looking very American.

'Very nice,' I murmured.

'You see, we had no *summer* clothes at all.'

'You must get my wife to tell you about someone she knows who makes hats.'

'Oh, I have had made, yes. You see, this that I wear ——' Her hand went up to the crownless jersey turban which sat on the very top of her head, with the great roll of hair at the back jutting out in a manner not intended for turbans, 'this is fine. Now all my hats are — what do you say? — turbans, yes?'

'Turbans. That's right.'

'You do not think my head large?'

'Not especially.'

'But it is, it is! In my will, I give my brains to the Surgical Institute in Vienna. They never have enough brains to work on, and big ones almost never. My head is nearly as big as Lenin's. You believe it?'

I wanted to laugh but when, between rows of rapidly moving cars, I glanced at her quickly, I saw that she was quite solemn, the blinking, questioning eyes waiting for an answer. 'Well, perhaps,' I said thoughtfully.

'Now, of course, the will cannot be executed. But now in Vienna there is also no need of brain dissection, is it not so?'

'Yes,' I said, 'it is so.'

We were on the very edge of Cambridge, waiting for a traffic light to change. In an empty lot on the corner stood the tents and booths and painted contraptions of a traveling carnival show, all of it looking very faded in the bright sunlight, the Ferris wheel bleakly skeletal against the pale summer sky, the organ music from the merry-go-round sounding thin and tired. I heard my wife point out that, yes, this was still Cambridge, that there was more to Cambridge than Brattle Street and Harvard Yard. 'Yes?' Herr Lessing was saying. 'Yes, yes? Is it so, yes?' I saw him lean forward to watch a sailor at a trap-shooting stand, picking off the white clay ducks one by one as they went round on their endless track. His gun was sharp and crackling in the traffic lull.

Frau Lessing laughed as we started forward again and, her head cocked, she said, 'You know, my daughter, Trilla, she has a small, pretty head, and I must tell you now — I must tell you of her very amusing experience.'

'Yes?' I said, falling into their habit. 'Yes?'

And through the hot, bleached stretches of Somerville and Everett she told me the story. 'Now I must tell you, Trilla is very pretty, very charming,' she began. Trilla, it seems, had married a young Jewish physician some months before *Anschluss* and she had rejected a rather well-known Austrian Nazi to do so.

Trilla was the only one of the Lessings then in Austria — her brother, on a passport about to expire, was teaching in Beirut, and the parents were doing research at the British Museum on a sabbatical. On the morning of that famous day in 1938, March 11, Trilla and her husband boarded a train for Switzerland, their papers in order, but by the time Schuschnigg made his wireless address that evening, they had not yet arrived in Innsbruck because their train had been stopped so often.

They got off the train then, abandoning everything but a rucksack each, their skiing clothes, which they put on, and their skis. They skied for three days and two nights and at last came to the border. There were two trails — one, they knew, across into Switzerland, the other back into Austria; but they did not know which was which. At a customs shack near-by, they boldly asked for the trail back into Austria. One of the young men in charge took a look at Trilla and offered to take them back on the trail for a stretch. There were a couple of hours of desperate flirtation, with the young husband making himself as inconspicuous as possible, and a dozen efforts to shake off the ardent guide. At last, only because he had to pursue three people obviously in flight did he abandon them. That night, in the darkness, they escaped.

'And so now she is in France, and her passport too is about to expire, but she is very pretty, very charming, and they still have a little money. . . . I think it will be all right, yes?'

'What is that, please?' Lessing asked.

'It's an outdoor movie,' my wife said. 'You drive in and sit in your car and watch the picture.'

'Outdoor movie? So?' Frau Lessing said eagerly and then, abruptly, chagrined, '*Ach, Georg!*'

I glanced into the reflector. Herr Lessing's face had gone quite pale and he was searching desperately through his pockets. 'My glasses!' he said to no one, and nearly in anguish.

'Look on the floor,' my wife said, looking there herself.

He bent down too, and his hands ran rapidly over the floor of the car in a frenzy.

'Behind you, under you!' his wife cried nervously.

Frantically he searched the seat.

'No,' he said, 'No, Ursula. *Gott!*'

'Did you have them? Are you certain you had them?' my wife asked.

'*Gewiss, gewiss,*' he said impatiently. 'Always I have them.'

I drew up to the side of the road — we were more or less in the country by this time — and shut off the engine. The man was frightfully upset, and I was already wondering how much glasses cost. In his budget, clearly, they would be no small item. Stupidly I echoed my wife. 'You're sure you had them?'

He looked at me with stricken eyes and his wife answered for him. '*Ach, ja,*' she said, in her own nervousness lapsing completely into German. '*Er hat sie immer in der Tasche, gerade hier.*' She put her hand on her breast to indicate the inner pocket of a man's jacket and added, 'Always he has them. He is so careful. They are most important.'

I climbed out of the car and said, 'Let me look.' But our search, which at Herr Lessing's plea involved the removal of

the tightly fitted rear seat, was fruitless. I said, 'We'll go back and see if you forgot them.'

'I did not forget, I did not forget, I did not, I know, forget . . .' By this time his head was in his hands.

'*Ach*, Georg,' his wife mumbled sympathetically, almost as stricken as he, but when she caught my eye on her, she laughed. 'It is so silly, in one way; his glasses are so weak — what do you say? — compared? — yes, *compared* to mine. It is so silly. . . .'

I made a quick U-turn and started back. I drove faster. My wife looked miserable, and Herr Lessing was making another even more frantic search through his clothing. Try to imagine, I kept telling myself, how important ten or fifteen or twenty dollars are when you have so little. And still, it all seemed quite excessive, I thought.

'Tell me,' I said, trying to make conversation, 'did Herr Lessing have his appointment here before you left England?'

She looked at me in surprise. 'But of course,' she said. 'Otherwise we could not have come without guarantors, or so quickly. They would not have let us in, you know. . . .'

'Of course,' I said. 'It's for a year?'

'A year at a time, yes. That is a long time now in our lives.'

'Yes,' I said, beginning to thread our way back through the horrible suburban traffic. I was driving too fast but I had a feeling that everyone in the car wanted me to drive faster. 'It must have been frightful, too, being there in England, unable to get back, your house just gone like that, and everything you owned, really, wasn't it?'

She smiled. 'So that I had not even one summer dress.'  
'Yes.'

'It was not happy,' she said, 'and yet it was, too. There was only one thing that we really had to have from our house. Now I must tell you that the first half of my husband's new book was already written. We were working on the second half, you see? And the first half — I do not know why, but

we had been stupid enough to leave it. It was all in the manuscript still and so bulky. It is to be a very large book, you see?’

‘You mean he’ll have to rewrite ——’

‘Oh, but no! He went back.’

I looked at her. ‘What?’

‘Yes. He went back. He got it. Everything in the house had been — what you say, looted? — yes, *looted* — our pictures gone, our silver, my clothes, his academic gown — but the manuscript, that was there, scattered over the floor. How dull they must have found it.’

‘Oh, but how fortunate!’

She looked at me, her wise eyes blinking. ‘Yes?’ she said. ‘Yes? Yes?’

‘Well, wasn’t it?’

‘He was gone for two months, you see. I did not hear from him, I did not know what had happened. That was not happy, yes?’

I saw him in the reflector. He was sitting in one corner of the seat, very erect yet somehow crushed there, his head lifted yet his face gray with misery. He was not listening to my wife’s chatter. I began to wonder if I could find the money for new glasses and if he would let me . . . He caught my eye in the mirror, and before I looked away, I saw him pull himself together and smile in a rather dreadful way. ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘this city of Saint Paul, you know it?’

‘I’ve been there. It’s pleasant, I guess.’

And then we all gave up trying.

We were in Somerville. I began to cut through traffic like a police car and ran a red light and every yellow one. Then at last we drew up before the student rooming house where the Lessings were staying. Herr Lessing leaped out before I could help him. He stumbled up the shabby steps. The door, with its blank lace curtain, closed behind him.

Frau Lessing, peering through her heavy glasses, looked

searchingly at each of us, first at my wife and then at me. At last she looked down at her hands, gripped together in her lap. 'I must tell you now,' she said, 'those two months that he did not come back to England . . . You see, he was seized at once; he was in Dachau for seven weeks. You know Dachau, yes? They let him go when he — what do you say — con — convinced? —' both of us nodded vigorously, 'when he *convinced* them that he had employment in America and that men of importance here were expecting him. You see, in the end it was all right; but at first . . . Now I must tell you, the first thing that they did to him on the train to the camp was to tear his glasses from his face and step on them. You see, that hurt him, and now when he does not have them he is like that, afraid. . . .'

We saw him come running down the steps. The glasses were on his face. All of us sighed and then smiled.

'So stupid,' he muttered as he climbed back in, 'so stupid of me. You forgive, yes?'

'It was nothing.'

'I'm so glad you found them,' my wife said.

I started the motor and I heard him saying pleasantly to my wife, 'When you were with us that time, did you meet our friend, Fräulein Picard, the actress? I was wondering just now . . . No? She is ——' He was making a notable effort to steady himself.

'Now I must tell you,' Frau Lessing was saying to me, 'now I must tell you about our son, Brendl, and his very amusing experience. I must tell you that Brendl is very — what do you say, alert? — yes! So it was that Brendl had — but first I must tell you . . .'

Everyone but Lessing seemed very happy now, when his voice, deeply troubled, explaining to my wife, broke in. 'It is just nerves. So stupid, to have to depend on anything that way. Like spectacles . . .'

'Brendl —' Mrs. Lessing was saying loudly. 'I must tell you now ——'

Lessing's hand touched my shoulder. 'That place where the sailor was shooting — could we stop there?'

'Ach, Georg,' his wife cried, 'the country, we must get on ——'

'No, no,' he said, 'it is not so urgent.' And to me again, 'Can we stop, yes? I must train my sight. To learn to hit a small target, that would be good for the sight, yes? Could we stop? I want to see ——'

'Of course,' I said. 'Why not?'

'To shoot at those clay ducks, that would be good, yes? We will, then?'

'Certainly. Glad to.'

And that was the moment in which his quiet, saddened face turned radiant. Astonished, I saw it in the mirror and I saw his wife and mine turned toward him, staring.

Believe me, he was a different man.

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## 19

### *Consideration of the Poor*

IT WAS ONLY eight o'clock in the morning, but Sara Thornton came to breakfast in her hat, an early spring model, brilliant red, with a wide brim that fanned off the face to accommodate her soft brown pompadour. The red hat was in sharp contrast to her cocoa-brown suit. 'Kick me, Jack,' she said to her husband. 'I've made a hideous mistake.'

'What's wrong?'

'Where you going, Mummie?' Sage, their six-year-old son, asked.

'Where you going, Mummie?' asked Susan, the three-and-a-half-year-old who sat beside him.

'Don't *echo*, Susan,' Sara said. She kissed them both abstractedly on the top of the head and sat down and opened her napkin. 'I'm coming to school with you,' she said.

'Are you *really*?' Sage cried, bouncing up and down on his chair.

'I could die,' Sara said. 'What *can* she think of me?'

Jack watched her drink her orange juice. 'Who?' he asked.

'Mrs. Crawford. She's what's called the class parent . . . Oh, good morning, Nellie.'

Nellie, the 'Thorntons' servant, took the empty orange-juice glass and put down a plate with a poached egg and toast, and went out.

'Start at the beginning,' Jack said.

'Well, I had two bundles,' Sara began, 'one full of discarded children's clothing for the school's charity, the other

full of discarded stuff too, but practically all in rags and not children's clothing at all but an old jacket of yours out at the elbows, some shrunken old flannels, my old green house coat, and — oh God, it's sickening! — some torn woollen underpants of mine! Not even washed. Of course they weren't washed. Why should they have been?'

'What was that for?'

'Salvage! And that bundle went to the school three days ago. I just discovered the right bundle still in my closet.'

Sage broke in. 'We have to give things to The Poor that we really like, otherwise it isn't giving, is it?'

'The voice of Miss T.,' Sara muttered to Jack.

Sage looked from one of his parents to the other. 'I know who Miss T. is,' he said. 'It's Miss Thomas.'

'No, Sage,' Sara said, 'it is not. And Sage, you will have to learn not to interrupt us if you're to eat in here. Otherwise you'll go back to the kitchen again.'

'I don't pay three hundred dollars a year to what's supposed to be a liberal school just to get back nineteenth-century ideas like that one!' Jack exclaimed. '*The Poor!*'

'I know, Jack,' Sara said quickly, warning him with a glance. 'I'm going into that with Miss Thomas this morning if I have a chance.'

'Do I know any of The Poor, Daddy?' Sage asked.

'Yes,' said Jack, glancing at his watch. 'Very well. Me.'

'Finish your milk, Susan,' Sara said, but Susan slid under the table and Sara turned to Jack again. 'The school was very explicit about what it wanted. Children's clothing only, and it had to be in good condition and clean. It was supposed to be attractive —'

'Where does Mrs. Crawford come in?'

'She's in charge of the collection from Sage's class. Sorts it out and so on. If it were any other mother in the school!'

'Why?'

'I know Timmy Crawford,' said Sage. 'He's on *my* side.'

'I know Timmy Crawford,' said Susan, who was sitting under the table untying her shoelaces.

'You do *not* know Timmy Crawford, either!' Sage shouted scornfully.

'Sage! Quiet!' Sara cried. She turned to Jack again. 'Why? Because the Crawfords are rolling in money and she has four servants, who give her plenty of leisure to look like the perfect, thoughtful mother, not to say the perfect, thoughtful liberal who runs a half-dozen worthy committees. Haven't you ever seen their *house*? It's supposed to have ten bathrooms.'

'Have you ever seen it?'

'Often — from the outside,' Sara said as she pushed the last bit of egg on the last bit of toast and put it angrily in her mouth. 'Don't you see? She probably won't even see that it *is* a mistake!'

'Why are you going to the school?'

'To get the bundle back. It's a few women like Mrs. Crawford who are responsible for the atmosphere which produces the p-o-o-r.'

'P-o-o-r,' Sage spelled after her. 'I know! Poor. *The* Poor.'

'The poor, the poor, the poor,' sang Susan, still under the table, where she was fingering the suède bows on her mother's shoes.

'Be careful of my stockings, Susan,' Sara said with irritation. 'In fact, get up off the floor. For heaven's sake, Susan. Come here.' She took the child's hand and pulled her out from under the table. 'You and Sage go to the kitchen and let Nellie help you on with your coats and things.'

The children went out and Jack said, 'I still think we should have sent them to a public school. Is this America or isn't it?'

'Darling,' Sara said, 'I believe in the public-school system just as much as you do. But everyone knows that the public

schools in this town are worse than in any other town in Westchester. It's a disservice to a child ——'

'Figure it out. Two hundred dollars for Susan in a nursery group, three hundred for Sage in first grade. It'll be five hundred dollars apiece by the time they get to the eighth grade. Aside from the little problem of where it's coming from, what are they getting for it?'

'Oh, Jack, that's not fair. They get a lot. Leafy Lane really does train for citizenship in a democracy ——'

'My idea,' Jack said, 'is that when you're paying that kind of money, you're buying something else. Timmy Crawford's company, I guess.' He glanced at his watch again. 'I've got to go. Give 'em hell.'

'That's just the point, Jack,' Sara said eagerly. 'The fact that I can, the fact that the school asks for parent criticism, shows that Mrs. Crawford is not the school. It really is ——'

He kissed her before she could finish her sentence. 'Be good,' he said. 'See you tonight.'

'Good-bye, darling,' she said, swallowed the last of her coffee, and called to the kitchen, 'Hurry, children!'

Leafy Lane School consisted of ten low, new buildings and a playing field safely enclosed within a wall. The building had been weatherproofed but not painted and, in spite of the expert architecture and planning, looked casual, almost homely. Sara Thornton came through the gate with her two children, and carrying a bulky brown package by the string. She left the children at the door of the main building, where they attended the morning assembly of twenty minutes, and proceeded briskly along a winding gravel walk until she came to the first-grade building.

'Oh, good morning, Miss Thomas. I'm so glad I found you.'

Miss Thomas, a young woman with colorless hair and glasses, was on her knees sorting a pile of large finger paintings. 'Oh, good morning, Mrs. Thornton.' She stood up and

smoothed out the flowered gingham smock which covered her black dress. 'I didn't expect you. The office always lets us know ——'

'Oh, I'm not really visiting. I came about something else. About that package I sent up with Sage — the charity things. I've just found I sent the wrong one. This is the right one.'

Miss Thomas took the package. 'You can leave this, but I'm afraid the others have gone.'

'Mrs. Crawford?' Sara asked tentatively.

'Yes. She's taken them all home with her.'

'Oh, dear.'

'She must have them still. You could call her.'

'Yes, I could,' Sara said as she glanced unhappily at a row of paintings fastened on one wall. 'Those are nice,' she said.

'Some of them really do very well,' Miss Thomas answered. She put the package on top of the schoolroom piano.

'Any of Sage's?' Sara asked casually.

'Well, no. There aren't any up now. I have some here ——'

'Oh, it doesn't matter.'

Miss Thomas glanced at her. 'Well, it does, really,' she said. 'As a matter of fact, Mrs. Thornton, I've been wanting to have a chat with you about Sage. Sit down a moment, won't you?' She pointed to a child's chair, and after Sara sat down on it, her knees awkwardly high, Miss Thomas pulled up another chair like it and sat facing her. 'Sage isn't doing as well as he should, you know. He is apparently unwilling to concentrate. He seems to lack direction or any real interest in what he's doing.'

'I don't see ——' Sara started crossly.

'I'll show you,' Miss Thomas said. She knelt before the stack of paintings, quickly leafed through them, and laid two at Sara's feet.

'This is Sage's,' she said, pointing to a chaotic mass of muddy colors, 'and this is the little Jackson child's, a child no more promising than Sage but much better in his performance, you see.'

Sara looked at a skeletal but recognizable locomotive passing over a rudimentary trestle. 'I see,' she said.

'When Sage paints,' Miss Thomas went on, 'he rushes, as he does with everything. In the shop, or if you watched him with blocks, or his impatience with numbers, or when we do a little spelling, or rhythms — it's all the same. A mad scramble to finish a chore which has no interest for him.'

'Isn't it the business of the school to give him direction, Miss Thomas?' Sara asked coldly.

'Yes,' Miss Thomas said, 'but we must have the co-operation of the parents. I've noticed, for instance, that you haven't been here nearly as often as most of the parents.'

Sara stared at her.

'Please don't be offended. Of course you don't neglect him consciously. He's your child. But do you make him feel that he has a *place* in your life? It's so easy to take a child for granted. But no more easy than it is for a child to get the feeling that he's an outcast in an alien, adult world, neglected, even a burden, you know, a poor unfortunate ——'

'*Poor?*' Sara echoed sharply.

'And then he may lose his whole sense of purpose, begin to make all sorts of complex compensations, identifications, develop anxieties ——'

'I wanted to speak to you about something, too, Miss Thomas,' Sara interrupted, but then, without warning, the door flew open and the class began to file in.

'To your lockers!' Miss Thomas shouted cheerfully, and, turning to the piano, struck out a series of martial chords.

Sara watched the children troop past her. At the end of the line came Sage. When he saw her, he stopped. 'My mummie!' he shouted loudly, and the children turned to look at her. He ran and threw his arms about her thighs.

'Why, Sage!' she said uneasily. 'Go along with the rest.'

He looked up at her doubtfully and followed reluctantly after the line to the lockers in the next room.

'How happy he was to find you here! A display of interest is all ——'

'Well, thank you, Miss Thomas,' Sara said severely. 'I'll come another time soon.'

'But you wanted to ask me ——'

'Oh, not now that the children are back. And I do have to see Miss Graham for a moment.'

Outside, on the gravel path, Sara began immediately to compose the remarks she would make to the head of the school. 'I meant to take this up with Miss Thomas, but I doubt if she'd understand me. Leafy Lane is supposed to be liberal, isn't it, interested in our society, in today, in preparing our children to live in the twentieth century? But Miss Thomas seems to have some curiously outmoded ideas. Ever since the school's charity was first mentioned to him, my child has been talking incessantly about something which he calls *The Poor*. What *are* *The Poor* to him, a six-year-old? Some strange abstraction, the sort of notion one might have picked up in a Victorian boarding school. It doesn't seem either realistic or liberal. You know, Miss Graham, someone has called this the people's century. In another year we may all be penniless. Certainly it is not the time in history to instill in children such patronizing attitudes. The very smugness of that term — "*The Poor!*" I must say that the whole thing shocks me deeply.'

Sara was at the main building and very angry. She went firmly through the door and into the office. 'I'm Mrs. Thornton. May I see Miss Graham, please?' she said to the girl at the desk.

'Miss Graham's busy just now. Won't you wait?'

Sara sat down. She took off her hat and put it on the chair beside her. She would not wear it or even take it into Miss Graham's office. Then she remembered Mrs. Crawford.

'May I use your telephone?'

'Of course. Let me call your number.'

'Would you? I want to speak to Mrs. Crawford.'

The girl looked at a list tacked over her desk and dialled a number. She asked for Mrs. Crawford and after a moment she said, 'Mrs. Crawford? . . . This is the school. Mrs. Thornton would like to speak to you.' She handed the instrument to Sara.

'Mrs. Crawford? . . . I'm so embarrassed. I can't imagine what you must think of me. . . . It's about that bundle my child brought for the charity. Have you opened it? . . . Oh, good! I'm so relieved. You see, I made a ridiculous error. The real bundle is here now, but the one you have is full of perfectly useless things. Could I get it? . . . For tea? This afternoon? Oh, I'd love it! . . . Why, how sweet of you! Of course I'll bring him. He'd adore it. He talks about Timmy all the time. . . . At four-thirty, then. Good-bye.'

She was smiling when she put the instrument down, and she said 'Thank you' to the girl in a warm, happy voice.

'Miss Graham should be free any moment. I'm sorry to keep you.'

But Sara was putting on her hat. 'I don't think I will wait now. I can see her another time. It's not really important at all.'

*The Right to a Little Peace*

ONE SUNDAY MORNING Sara Thornton awoke to the usual sound of ack-ack above her, loud and sharply explosive, an expert imitation by her six-year-old son, Sage, who could apparently think of no better way to greet the morning. Sara looked at the clock on her bed-table: ten minutes to seven. She groaned and began to pull the covers over her head when Jack said, 'Good God!'

'My wonderful bedroom,' she muttered. 'What a laugh!'

The morning light sifted through the slats of the blinds and laid stripes of sunlight on the burgundy walls, across the arched Victorian grate, the satiny lounge, the white fur rug. Although Sara's bedroom was not quite the retreat she had planned it — the four-story house was old, and the walls and ceilings thin — it was the most attractive room in the house because the children were never allowed to enter it. It represented the principle of personal rights. Order and charm were preserved here, and at least a degree of quiet, and, as well, an important air of dalliance and domestic romance. To this sanctuary the Thorntons fled the household to have a quiet cocktail or to listen to the news over Sara's white portable radio in relative peace.

The ack-ack ceased and Susan, the three-and-a-half year old, sang shrilly and deliberately in her bed above them, 'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, forty.'

Jack laughed. 'That sweet, silly girl.'

Sara looked at him. It was only when he first awoke, with

his black stubble unshaved and his hair rumped and stiff, that Jack still seemed as young to her as he had seven years before when they were married. 'Sweet monsters,' she said. 'Look what they've done to us. And to all our lovely plans. All that traveling we were going to do.'

'An unnatural mother,' he said.

'What happened to that scheme of spending an occasional week-end in a hotel, to get away from it all?'

'What did? How about next week-end?'

'Good. Nellie can manage them on Saturday, and I'll get someone for Sunday. Maybe Helen will.'

'Eleven, eleven, eleven, eleven,' Susan was screaming. 'Eleven, eleven, twenty, eleven.'

In Sage's room, loud thumpings began.

'What's that?'

'He's getting into his foxhole,' Sara said resignedly, and then, when the rat-tat-tat of machine-gun fire began, she said, 'Damn it,' and got up.

'What Sunday mornings used to be!' Jack watched her hastily pull on a quilted robe.

'It isn't worth it,' she said vaguely as she went out to the foot of the stairs. 'Susan! Sage! Get dressed!' she called sharply.

When she came back, she closed the window, adjusted the blinds, and sat down before her dressing table. Jack lay on his back with his arms behind his head and watched her brush her brown hair. 'Well,' he said after a wide yawn, 'let's get them out and give the Moores a treat.'

'The Moores! I forgot all about them. Weren't they nasty? "The right to a little peace." Isn't that what he said? Really!' she cried angrily, turning to look at him, her brush stopped against the curled ends of her hair at her shoulder.

'Very nasty.'

'I have no intention of worrying about the Moores,' she

said firmly, and winced as the sounds of power-diving came piercingly through the ceiling. 'Speak to the child, Jack. Make him dress!'

After breakfast, Sara went out into the yard with the children to unlock the cellarway where their outdoor toys were kept. She stared at the apartment building which abutted the Thorntons' tiny garden and towered over the row of houses in which they lived. Behind some of those countless windows lived the wretched Moores, who had complained of the noise the children made outside, and who were no doubt peering down at her now. She tugged at a yellow steam shovel which was too heavy for Sage to lift, and glanced down the stairs at the collection of engines and metal instruments and machines, all capable of considerable noise, but every one the perfect right of any child.

When she came in, she said, 'I hope those Moores didn't think I brought the children in right away because *they* telephoned. It was their suppertime. I would have brought them right in anyway.'

'Are you worrying?' Jack asked.

'Not in the least. But how really unnatural!' she exclaimed.

They had hardly finished their coffee when Sage appeared in the dining room with Susan trailing after him. 'We want to come in,' he said. 'It's cold out there.'

'Cold! Why, Sage, the sun and air will make you big and strong. You want to grow up to be a commando, don't you?'

'Yes, but — We want to play upstairs.'

'We want to play upstairs,' said Susan.

'Nonsense!' Sara said crossly, and then, taking a very patient tone, 'Sage, listen to me. You know this is Sunday, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, who doesn't come on Sundays?'

‘Nellie.’

‘That’s right. And I have to do all of Nellie’s work. And you and Susan must help me, Sage, or we’ll all get angry and impatient with each other, won’t we?’

‘But we’re cold, and we want to play upstairs.’

Sara’s lips tightened. ‘But Sage, you will only help me if you play out of doors. And later this afternoon who will come to read to you?’

‘Helen,’ Sage said without pleasure.

‘Yes. So come along now.’ She tried to take his hand, but he edged away. ‘Come along,’ she said again.

He backed toward the wall. ‘No.’

‘Why, you naughty boy!’ she cried angrily. ‘I will *not* have you imposing on your father and me.’ She seized his hand and pulled him out of the room with her. Susan trailed silently along behind them. Jack, who had been reading the *Sunday Times*, looked up when he heard the commotion.

Presently Sara returned. ‘There,’ she said, ‘that’s settled.’

After Sara had stacked the dishes, and just after she had put the children’s lunch — peanut-butter sandwiches, salad, milk, and stewed prunes — before them at the kitchen table, the doorbell rang. She wiped her hands on a tea towel, pulled off her smock, and went to answer it. She opened the door to a stranger.

‘Mrs. Thornton?’ the man asked. ‘I’m Humphrey Moore.’

‘Oh,’ she said. Jack came down the stairs behind her.

‘Hello, Thornton,’ the man said, ‘I’m Moore.’ He put out his hand.

Jack said, ‘Oh,’ and shook hands with him. ‘Come in?’

‘Well ——’ the man hesitated. ‘I came to apologize about calling you yesterday. Thought I might have seemed rude.’

‘Well, come in,’ Jack said. ‘It’s cold out.’

He was quite a tall man, in his early forties, thin, slightly

stooped, a little bald. His hands nervously turned his hat round and round. He smiled bleakly and said, 'I thought I ought to explain.'

'Yes,' Sara agreed, staring at him.

'Perhaps you don't realize how noise carries back there. We're on the third floor of the apartment building, all our rooms on the back, you see. So there's no way of escaping the sounds. And you people, living in this block of tall brick houses — well, any sound from the yards is concentrated by the two walls, and apparently it has to go up, all of it up, and it gets amplified, because of the peculiar relationship of this block of houses and our building, and, well ——'

Sara said, 'We've lived here for two years and no one has ever complained.'

The man smiled. 'I'm an accoustical engineer. But I don't think I'm unusually sensitive to sound.' He laughed uneasily.

The Thorntons stared at him. Sara said, 'And your wife — she's an accoustical engineer too?'

The man stopped smiling. 'The noises are very disturbing. It isn't that I don't like children, I do. But all morning, ever since eight ——'

'Do you have any?' Sara asked sharply.

'No.'

'You're new here?'

'Why, yes. We've lived in France mostly. I worked with the Televox people. Now we're here, and we've just got settled in this apartment, and my wife is very nervous, she can't bear excessive noises ——'

Jack said, 'Every sound our children have ever made has been perfectly normal.'

'It's only,' the man began to explain, 'the way it carries. There must be something peculiar about the particular relation of our apartment to the entire area of sound, you see ——'

'I don't see, Mr. Moore,' said Sara.

He looked at his bony hands twisting his hat. 'Mrs. Moore thought if you could keep them out of the yard just part of the weekend. Take them out to the park or something ——'

'This is a noisy city, Mr. Moore,' Sara said. 'Perhaps you and your wife should live in the country.'

'I work here,' he said, 'with difficult hours. I need to rest on the weekend.'

'Who doesn't work?' Jack asked.

He tried once more. 'Please come and listen. Please come to our apartment and listen. It's probably quite different ——'

'I know my children's voices,' Sara said.

He hesitated. 'We will have to take some action. My wife ——'

'What action?' Jack demanded at once.

'Why, the police, I suppose.'

Sara opened the door. 'Good-bye, Mr. Moore,' she said, and after he stepped out, she closed it immediately behind him. Then at once she said to Jack, 'We have to get to the police before he does. Now. That's the only thing. Complain about them. This is outrageous, but if they went first, they'd have the advantage.'

'Oh, I don't think they'll go. Not that fellow.'

'Listen, Jack,' Sara said, 'I can see his wife. I know that type. Childless, neurotic, spoiled, lived all her life in Paris, everything her way. And now she's going to tell me how to deal with my children. The gall! I slave, and she frets. Listen, you've got to go right down there.' She seized his lapels. 'You will, won't you, Jack?'

'Sure,' he said, 'but let's have lunch first.'

Later in the afternoon, Jack came in, dropped his hat in the hall, and went quickly upstairs. 'Baby,' he said in the living room, 'you can stop fuming. He was wonderful. The name is Murphy.'

'What happened?' Sara dropped her book.

'Wouldn't Murphy love children? You should have been there. He wouldn't even let me finish the story. "What are back yards for if they aren't for kids?" he wanted to know. "Listen, Mr. Thornton," he said, "the next time those people disturb you, you call me, personally. Don't you take anything from them, just refer them to me, see?"'

'Oh, Jack, that's lovely!'

'I said, "Lieutenant Murphy, is an American to be penalized for having children? And by someone who hasn't even been living in this country?" His face got red at the thought. Where are they?'

'They've been out all afternoon, and not a peep from the Moores.'

Jack and Sara went to the back of the house and looked down. The gardens on either side of the Thornton yard, tiny as they were and in spite of the ugly red board fences between them, were really gardens, with tidy evergreens and a laurel or two, brick paths, and brick borders to mark off grass and neat flower beds in spring and summer; but the Thornton garden was only a yard, its vegetation and order long devastated by the onslaughts of the children. Even now Sage was working furiously at the last fragments of concrete which had formed some more enterprising tenant's bird bath, his shovel efficiently uprooting them and presently tossing up a few random pounds of earth. Then he crouched in the shallow hole which he had achieved and pulled a curious contraption of narrow strips of wood in after him. Aiming this at Susan, who was busily and clangingly hurling the seat of the swing at its metal uprights, the rat-tat-tat of machine gunning began once more. Then suddenly the areaway was echoing with shouts and screams, Sage crying, 'Fall down, you dope! You're dead!' and Susan, furiously and shrilly, insisting that she was not.

The telephone rang. Sara watched Jack as he listened to

the voice, his mouth twitching angrily and then smiling in a rather nasty way as he said, 'You go right ahead,' and put the receiver down firmly before the voice had stopped.

He laughed. 'Don't we really plan to co-operate about those children? If not, the Moores are going to get up a petition to run us out of the neighborhood. Oh, Lieutenant Murphy!'

He dialled the telephone, and while they waited for an answer, they heard the children below suddenly chanting loud and clear their wild version of *God Bless America*.

'Where'd they get that?' Jack asked.

'School, I guess.'

'Lieutenant Murphy, please,' Jack was saying. 'Hello? My name is Thornton. I was in to see you this afternoon. — Yes, that's right. — Yes, just now. They're threatening a petition to force us to move. — Yes, sir. — You can? You will? That's fine. — Thank *you*, sir.' He chuckled. 'Lieutenant Murphy will be right over to wait on the Moores. He's going to tell them who will move, if anyone does.'

'Oh, dear,' Sara said. 'I'm worried.'

'Why?'

'Remember the old lady who used to live on the third floor of that building, Jack? I was just thinking. They *are* noisy, of course. That old lady used to wave at them out of her window at first, and make faces, and once or twice she told me how sweet they were. But then she stopped, and one day when I was out there with them, she opened her window, with her hand on her gray hair, and she said, "Your children! My head!"'

Jack laughed. 'Sure, they're noisy. All kids are.'

'And you think it will be all right?'

'With Murphy? Baby!'

The sounds of *God Bless America* rose to a high and faltering crescendo. Sara listened. 'I know. When will he be there?'

'The station's a couple of blocks away. He was furious. He'll be right along if I know my Murphies. Why?'

Sara was on her way to the storeroom on the top floor of the house, and when she came down, she waved a small American flag at him. She rushed to the kitchen, opened the door to the yard, called in the children, said 'Do you think I'm crazy, Helen?' to the high-school girl at the sink as she hastily picked over the pots on the pantry shelf, and gave each child a firm kiss on the cheek. 'Look, Mummy's thought up a game. That's a lovely song you were singing. Why don't you have a parade while you sing? It's a patriotic song, you know. Susan, you can carry this flag and march in front. And here, Sage, is a drum for you to keep time on. You must both sing. Helen, give me that metal ladle. There. Isn't that a good idea?'

The children, who were accustomed to thinking up their own games, beamed with pleased surprise. Sage beat tentatively on the bottom of his kettle, which made a very satisfactory sound, and Susan began to sing shrilly, 'From the *mount* — ings, to the *prair* — eee . . .'

'Now, outside with you. March round and round the yard.'

The Thorntons peered down from behind glass curtains. The parade was a triumph, loud, seemingly endless. Presently a heavy red hand pulled back curtains on the third floor of the apartment building, and a man's large face appeared at the window. He smiled, and then he scowled, and broad shoulders swung round forbiddingly as he faced the people in the room. The Thorntons, clutching each other with pleasure, watched the hand appear and reappear before the window, stubby index finger out, in a gesture which could demonstrate only the utter innocence of the scene below. And they listened to the high, relentless voices of their children with delight.

'I'm going upstairs, Jack,' Sara said afterwards. 'Get us a drink. Helen will bring the children in.'

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When Jack came up to Sara's room, everything was cozy. The blinds were closed against the twilight, a fire was glowing in the grate, the lamps with their white shades were lit, and Sara was looking lovely and rested and happy, stretched out on her lounge in a white negligee.

'Oh, dear,' Sara sighed. 'Was it mean of me to get up that parade? He was such a mild, timid man, in a way ——'

'Mean? Listen, darling,' Jack said as he poured their martinis, 'we couldn't match them for meanness. You had the word for them — unnatural. They just weren't reasonable.'

Through the open door, the sharp sounds of the children's high voices rose from the living room below. They were quarreling about who was to have the first story. 'It's my turn,' Sage was insisting. 'No, mine,' cried Susan. 'My turn, Helen, tonight.' 'No, my turn, Helen.'

'Close the door, Jack,' Sara said.

He closed the door, handed her a cocktail, and sat down at her feet. Everything was quiet now, and charming. The coals in the grate crackled comfortably. Sara stretched her legs against Jack and sighed again.

'They just don't *like* children,' she said. 'If they did, they'd have some.'

'You know, Sara,' Jack said, 'I guess I never felt like a parent before.' He laughed. 'Rising furiously to protect my young.'

Sara, who was sipping her cocktail, suddenly frowned. 'But why should I hate them so, Jack? That isn't reasonable either, is it? I mean, if they are just eccentrics, they should probably be pitied. But I don't pity them in the least. I loathe them, as though they *meant* something to me. I really do *loathe* them.'



## 21

### *In and Out*

THEY HAD FINISHED LUNCH, they had stopped laughing, and now the three of them sat in silence at the restaurant table. The middle-aged man in the blue, pin-striped suit stared into his empty highball glass, and the middle-aged woman in the black dress with the rose in red sequins on her shoulder drew parallel lines on the cloth with her index finger, and the boy with the brown hair cut like a brush stared at the ceiling and whistled without making any sound. Suddenly he stood up. 'I have to go,' he said.

His father pushed himself up rather awkwardly and swayed a bit on his feet. He was a big man, as tall as his son but heavier, with a brown face that clearly had always been stronger than the boy's, even now when it was going to seed. 'Frankie,' he said.

The boy struggled into a wrinkled reversible coat and reached for his worn brown hat. 'Don't take it so hard,' he said humorously.

The father forced a smile. 'Hard? Hell, Frankie, I'm not taking it hard. Why, Frankie, I'm as proud as — Don't I know you're going to show 'em what —'

'Okay,' the boy said deprecatingly and glanced at his wrist-watch. 'I'll be late.' He turned to the woman. 'Well, good-bye, Louise. I'll be seeing you.' They shook hands and suddenly he bent down and put his cheek against hers.

'Good-bye, Frankie,' she said, and when he turned to his father again, she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

‘Good-bye, Dad.’

‘Good-bye, boy,’ his father said and put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. Frankie stood still for a moment, then moved abruptly away, turned once and grinned back, and went out of the restaurant. His father remained standing until the boy went past the windows, his head ducked into the drizzling rain.

It was pleasant in the soft smoky light, with waitresses treading about silently, the soft sounds of silver and glass on linen, low voices at lunch time, and the rain falling silently in mist outside. The street, through the tall windows, was faint and remote, the rain drifting in thin clouds across the hard buildings opposite, blurring vehicles, softening the outlines of people who passed, and the whole street. It was all pleasant, all subdued, and the man’s voice had some of that soft quiet in it when he said, ‘He called you Louise.’

‘He’s always called me Louise,’ she said. ‘You never notice anything.’

A waitress came to their table when the man signaled to her and he ordered more whisky.

‘You were always good to him,’ he said to the woman. ‘Jesus, for nine years now you’ve looked out for him. Half his life.’

‘He was always away at school,’ she said.

‘Oh, but the times in between. Holidays. You made his home, such as it is ——’

‘And camp in the summers,’ she said.

‘You were good to him. And you’ve been pretty sweet to me. Don’t think I don’t know it.’

She looked up at him and smiled painfully. ‘Don’t talk so loud.’

He put his hands on the edge of the table, pushed his back up straight, threw out his big shoulders, and, with dark anger in his handsome, tired face, stared about him. He said, ‘I mean it. You’ve been pretty nice. I’m grateful too.’ And

when she did not answer, he added, 'A time like this — when something like this happens, it makes you think. How lucky you've been, or unlucky. What you've had in your life. What you haven't had.'

The woman mumbled in reply, uncomfortable under his scrutiny. She had a full pink face, a worried mouth, and red-rimmed, uneasy eyes. She was a little plump, and looked embarrassed, as if she felt out of place, and kept glancing at the people round her. Whenever she moved her head a small red plume on her hat nodded and shook.

The waitress put down two jiggers of whisky, glasses with ice, some soda. The man drank his straight, in a swallow, and looking into the glass, he said, 'Poor Frankie. He won't be home for a while now.'

'No, not for a while, I guess. Still, he'll have furloughs ——'

'Home,' the man said. He looked up from his drink. 'He must have known about us. He must've always known.'

'You should have gone to the Induction Center with him. It would have been nicer.'

'This was easier,' the man said, and presently, again, 'He must've always known. Good God.'

'You never worried before,' the woman said. 'You never worried about anything that had to do with Frankie. And he doesn't know. I know he doesn't.'

'Frankie isn't stupid. He knows, all right. And isn't that something dandy to remember when he's in a tough spot, when he's got a bullet in his stomach, or when his legs are crushed, when he's lying alone on a hard field somewhere, or on hot sand, and something sweet is what he needs.'

'Frankie,' she said. 'He looked so white ——'

He stared at her moodily, and his broad mouth twitched just before he said, 'Stop that,' coldly and deliberately.

'What?'

'Picking at that cloth. Why don't you take care of your hands? Spend a dollar and get a manicure.'

She put her hands quickly in her lap and said, 'Let's go.' She picked up the white cloth gloves that lay beside her desert plate.

'Take it easy. I want a drink.'

'You've had too much now.'

'Ahh —' he said, and batted his hand toward her.

She sat staring, and neither spoke for a while. The man ordered another drink, and when the waitress left their table, he said, 'You ought to get somebody to help you buy your clothes.'

'Why are you nagging at me?' she murmured. 'What have I done? Just after you've been saying how grateful ——'

'That flower.'

She flinched, and again both of them stared at the table. Finally the man said, 'Frankie will do all right. He's in good shape. Frankie's a fine athlete.'

'Yes,' she agreed.

'Do you know anything about it?'

'Don't talk so loud.'

He looked round him defiantly. 'I'll tell the world,' he said, 'if I feel like it. He's one swell kid.'

'Sure he is,' she said. 'No one's arguing.'

'He would have been the best swimmer at Williams if he could have stayed there. He's a great swimmer. I taught him.'

'Did you?'

He shook his head from side to side, remembering, and smiled. 'When he was about so high. But husky as a kid could be, and rangy, too. Before you saw him, long before that. When we used to go to a place in the Cherry Valley in summer, a white house with an orchard that went down to a lake . . . Before Jenny died —' He broke off abruptly, but the almost gentle, reminiscent smile lingered on his mouth. 'Jesus,' he said, 'that's the way I still mark time, it's A.D. and B.C.'

The waitress brought his drink and when she turned away he drank it quickly. He watched the woman stirring her highball, which she had barely touched. 'Come on, now,' he said, 'let's see you drink it.'

'I don't like to drink right after a meal.'

'I've seen you drink plenty.'

She flushed and said, 'I don't want it. I'm going.' She stirred restlessly and began to pull on her gloves.

'Take it easy,' he said.

'No, I'm going,' she said, and as she strained at her glove, she knocked a spoon from the table with her elbow. She bent down.

'Leave that there,' the man said to her, his voice dead quiet.

She came up slowly and glanced at him.

'Leave it there,' he said, carefully pronouncing each word, his face rigid. She dropped her eyes. He relaxed a little. 'Won't you ever learn?' he asked. 'Won't you?'

She was pulling on the second glove. The headwaiter was hovering near their table now, and the man, slumped down again, looked idly at the check and said, 'Pay it, will you?' He dug into his pocket and threw some bills on the table. She began to sort them out. She put six dollars on the table and began to rummage through a coin purse. The man's eyes fixed themselves on the quarter which she laid on top of the six bills. 'What's that?'

'The girl's tip.'

'Listen, don't *be* like that. Remember what I told you about tips?' The man snorted and reached into his pocket. His hand came out and he tossed a half dollar on the table.

'That's just silly,' she said, looking at the two coins.

'Can you divide by ten?' he asked, and then shook his head back and forth slowly, pityingly, and looking at her, not unkindly now, he said, 'I always did what was easiest. Now that Frankie's gone, I see that. That's the trouble, I guess, you do what's easiest.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You do what's easiest, I'm saying.'

'Who? Me?'

'No, not you. No. Me. Take a look.'

'Well?'

'What I said. God, when I think ——'

She straightened up. 'When you think what?'

'Just that. When I think. When I think at all.' He shook his head dolefully.

'Who are you blaming?'

'I'm not blaming anybody,' he said. 'It was just my bad luck. And it's like I say — you do what's easiest, that's all.'

'Meaning me, I suppose,' she said angrily.

'Meaning you,' he said. 'Come on, there's a bar a couple of doors up ——'

'No more bars today, thanks,' she said, struggling into her black coat. Then she leaned forward and for the first time spoke to him with feeling. 'Listen,' she said, 'I'm sick of bars, and I'm sick of rooms full of cigar smoke, I'm sick of whisky and all hours of the night and nothing neat or in its place, and cheap women who *do* know how to dress and men whose life is just a long going to pieces. I'm sick of everything. Myself, too.' She covered her face with her handkerchief and wept into it. When she looked up again she said, 'I'm not much, I know. I'm just a plain woman, *plain*, you hear, and one who likes things to be neat, and I never did want that kind of a life.'

'Stop sniveling.' As he looked at her the lines of his face tightened. 'God damn,' he said reflectively.

She buttoned her coat. 'Listen,' she said softly then, 'I've done more ——'

'I know, I know,' he answered, 'more than most women would have. Sure. That's the trouble. Why'd you do it, when that wasn't what you wanted? I didn't want it either. That wasn't why I hired you. Makes it just dandy now,

doesn't it? Dandy for that kid. Now he can think of me in the long nights, that perfec'ly swell guy, his father. And you. He can remember Louise. God Almighty.' He looked at her and said, 'Oh, stop crying. I'm not worth it.'

She laughed. 'You! Do you think I'm crying for you? You really think that? It's Frankie I'm crying about. And myself. I love Frankie. You don't. It's *you* who doesn't know what he's like. I do. Everything his mother wouldn't have had to put up with, I did. And anything I did in the last nine years, all I've done that I hated, I did so I could stay near him. And now he's gone, and I'm through. You?' Her voice broke. 'Listen, I don't even *like* you.'

She stood up and started out, her eyes closed and her handkerchief pressed over her mouth and nose.

The man almost fell when he stood up, but he steadied himself against the table and stared after the woman. The headwaiter rushed up and took his arm. 'Go away,' the man said, pulling free, and went out, one arm in a sleeve of the coat, and the end of it dragging.

The woman hesitated before the windows; the drizzle had turned to hard rain, almost obscuring the traffic as it moved patiently uptown and downtown.

When the man appeared, she stared at him and then helped him with his coat. She got his arms into it, straightened out the collar, and buttoned it. The red plume on her hat was sagging from the downpour as she started away from him.

He put out his hand and seized her sleeve. They began to argue. She tried to push him away, but when he staggered, she clutched his arm and held him up. And then, helping him along the wet sidewalk, letting him support himself on her arm, they disappeared. Then there was only the rain driving obliquely past the window, and through the glittering curtain of it, the dim shapes of traffic, and presently, other people, bent forward into the rain, walking rapidly by.



## 22

### *Celebration*

HARRY FOSTER surprised his wife, Alice, by telephoning her one morning at about eleven o'clock. She had been straightening out her little boy's room and wondering, as she always did when she was in it, if they would ever be able to afford an apartment where he would have a larger and sunnier room. When Alice heard Harry's voice saying that he had been made a merchandise manager in the store where for five years he had been merely a buyer for a number of unimportant departments, she began to cry.

'Harry, I'm crying,' she said. 'How wonderful! How perfectly swell! Oh, darling, I'm ——'

'So start packing,' Harry said.

'You mean we can move?'

'Sure we can move — on fifteen hundred more.'

'Wait a minute,' she said. She found a wad of Kleenex in the pocket of her smock and wiped her eyes with it and blew her nose. 'How will we celebrate? I want to go to the Oval Club. We haven't been in a night club for three years.'

'I'll fix it,' Harry said. 'Good-bye, baby.'

That evening, when the Fosters arrived at the Oval Club, they were shown to a table next to the dance floor, which was a platform at the end of the room opposite the entrance. At the back of the platform the orchestra sat under a kind of canopy provided by a structure shaped like an enormous, scalloped shell.

Harry ordered drinks, and Alice said, 'Listen to what

they're playing.' She reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

'What is it?'

'It's "Love in Bloom." Don't you remember the Barbary Coast Orchestra at Dartmouth? They played it all that week end of House Parties when we got engaged. You kept singing it.'

'Did I?' Harry said. 'It was 1934. That's a long time.'

'Why don't we ever go back there? I love Hanover.'

'Do you?'

'I love those white buildings. When everything's green and the sun's setting. You never feel like going back, do you?'

'No,' Harry said. The waiter came and put their drinks down. When he went away, Harry looked at Alice and said, 'It's a second-rate college. Two good ones turned me down and Dartmouth took me.'

Alice laughed. 'Is that supposed to be a joke?'

'No.'

'Well, it's not true, Harry. Why are you saying it?'

'Of course it's true.'

'You never mentioned it before.'

'It's still true,' he said.

She put out her hand again and took his. 'What's the matter? Aren't you happy? This is a wonderful day, Harry. I feel wonderful. Just think what it means to us, to Phillip. Why, everything's changed, everything's going to be so easy now. Come on, be happy.'

'Ah,' he said, and, pulling his lax hand from under hers, finished most of his highball.

A few couples had started to dance on the platform, and Alice watched the men's trouser legs and the trim legs of their girls as they passed before her eyes not more than a foot away, their knees about on a level with the table. She smiled and turned back to Harry. 'You know what Phillip said today?

I was boning what was left of last night's mackerel to cream for his supper, and when he saw the backbone, he said, "Oh, Mummie, can I have it for my museum?" Isn't that cute?"

'Hmmm,' Harry said, watching the dancers, and then, 'That Weiner. He is really a stinker.'

'Oh, Harry.'

'He really is. God, how he hated to have to tell me I was promoted.'

'Oh, you just imagine ——'

'He practically said so. He said if they hadn't lost half their men, I wouldn't have had a chance. He said, "Foster, you're very lucky. This kind of position has always been for a first-class person." The crust of the guy.'

'Well, it is lucky ——'

'Thanks. That's what Weiner kept rubbing in.'

'I mean ——'

'And I wouldn't have got it if it had been up to him. For five years I've had to listen to his belittling remarks and take his lousy sniping. He can't stand to see me get out from under.'

'Harry, be reasonable. Why should Weiner have a grudge against you? He just works for the store like you do. He doesn't own it. He doesn't even run it.'

'He runs me. You never saw Weiner. Cracking the whip while I run is Weiner's chief pleasure. It breaks his heart to let me get ahead this way. For half an hour in his office he told me what a lousy buyer I was, and went over most of my records to prove it, and about the time I thought he was going to tell me I was through, he had to break down and tell me I was getting a promotion instead. You don't know him. You don't know what I've had to take from him for five years. His favorite topic — first-class men. He's a first-class bastard.'

'Let's dance, Harry.'

They stood up and Alice smoothed down the skirt of her

black dress. They went up the steps onto the platform and Harry put his hand on her back and they started dancing, slowly and soberly, like most of the others on the floor. Then a new couple appeared, a girl in a light-blue dress with a short, full skirt and a young man in a greenish suit. Neither of them was over twenty, and they were both very short, hardly more than five feet, and both had dark complexions and very black eyes and hair. They faced each other expressionlessly and began immediately the swift, mechanical swinging and turning of the jitterbug.

'Oh, my God!' Harry groaned. 'How did they get in? Do we have to put up with that?'

'They're cute,' Alice said. 'How *do* they do it?' They were executing their complicated steps very easily among the other dancers, twisting and turning, moving away from each other and coming together again, all very rapidly, and apparently without looking at anyone but themselves. The girl's long black hair swung out and around her head the way her skirt swung out and around her legs.

'Cute!' Harry said. Just a moment later the short young man backed into him, and he said loudly, 'Take it easy!'

'Sorry,' the young man said automatically, without glancing at Harry, and moved away again.

'Let's sit down,' Harry said.

'I'm having fun,' Alice said.

'I'm not. I don't feel like dancing.'

The Fosters went back to their table and Harry ordered more highballs. He watched the short, dark couple weaving in and out among the other dancers for a while and then he said, 'Wouldn't you know it? Out of this whole roomful of people, all of them content to dance quietly up there, the two people to come up with that stuff would be a couple of ——'

'Don't say it!' Alice blurted out.

'But there it is. Right in front of you. You couldn't ask

for better evidence. No sense of their surroundings at all, of how other people behave. Just a good chance to show off. Exhibitionists. You could predict it. It would take a couple of ——'

'Don't say it!'

Harry looked at her with pitying disgust.

'How do you know what they are?' Alice asked. 'They might be anything. They might be Italians, or Greeks, or Spaniards, or *anything*. Why, they could be Irish! Anyway I think they're very good. They are *very* clever, Harry. I'd give anything to be able to dance that way. Harry, I'm happy. I love everybody. I love being in this room. I love everyone in it. I love the music, I love you, I love those kids ——'

'Alice in Wonderland,' Harry said sourly.

'I love that girl's legs, too,' Alice went on. 'The one with the lace at the bottom of her dress.'

Harry looked up from his glass. The girl was just dancing past their table. She had rather large feet, in plain, black suède pumps with a medium heel, and her legs were nicely shaped, with robust calves and well-defined ankles.

'The shoes are about 9-B,' Harry said.

'But aren't her legs lovely?'

'No,' Harry said. 'They're much too thick. Those are the kind I like.'

He was looking at the legs of the next girl dancing past their table. The feet were short, with a high arch, in very high-heeled black sandals with an ankle strap; the legs were slim, with ankles which a man's hand could easily encircle and calves just perceptibly developed.

'Skinny,' Alice said.

'That's the kind I like, and they're very sexy.' Harry looked at Alice almost speculatively.

She glanced at him and smiled. 'Well-developed legs are sexy, but not poor, spindly things like that. Here are mine again.'

'Hulks,' Harry said.

Then the jitterbugs came by, the girl's blue dirndl skirt wrapping and unwrapping itself about her knees as she was twirled away from and back to her partner. Harry turned his back toward the platform in disgust.

The music ended abruptly with a flourish of drums. Alice and Harry watched the dancers come down from the platform.

'There's mine,' Alice said, looking at the girl with the heavy legs and the lace around the hem of her skirt.

'There's *mine*,' said Harry.

'Mine's wearing stockings.'

'Younger girls don't have to,' Harry said.

Alice bit on her lower lip, which was trembling, and watched the steps. The jitterbugs came down last of all, and then Harry and Alice saw that the headwaiter was confronting them and talking rapidly, angrily. The young man began to argue, and then the girl pulled him away.

'Thank God,' Harry said.

'Why? What happened?'

'He told them they couldn't dance that way here. Maybe he told them to get out.'

Alice said, 'That's the first time you've sounded happy tonight. Let's go.' She picked up her bag.

'Go? We just came. You wanted to see the show here. That's why you wanted to come.'

'I'm going. What's wrong with you, Harry? Why do you have to spoil everything? Why do you *always* spoil everything?'

'What are you talking about?'

Alice stood up. 'Those people weren't harming you. They were having a good time. So was I. We came here to celebrate. I felt good. Why did you have to spoil it? What did I do to you? Or don't you think I knew you were really talking about my legs?'

‘Listen ——’

She felt tears coming into her eyes, and she said, ‘Oh, damn you,’ and walked quickly toward the door at the far end of the room.



## 23

### *Blockbuster*

**T**ODAY, TODAY,' Dickie Morris said again, quietly, almost musingly, and no one in the room looked up at him. His sister Margie sat on the floor, busy with a parade of wooden animals she had removed from a crèche under the Christmas tree; his mother was reading on the sofa; and his father was still completely hidden by the Sunday newspaper. 'Today's the day,' the boy said, and turned to a window. He looked out at the suburban street, piled high with new snow, brilliant in winter sunshine, and he watched a man in a blue mackinaw pulling a boy on a sled, and a setter leaping beside them over drifts. He heard the newspaper rattling behind him, and he whirled round to see that his father had dropped it. 'Now?' he cried.

Dan Morris yawned and stretched out his arms.

'Sleepy?' Kitty Morris asked, looking up.

'I woke up at four and couldn't get back to sleep.'

'You were sleeping at seven.'

'Yes. Finally.'

'What was wrong?'

'I don't know. Nerves.'

'You — nerves?'

'Draft nerves, I suppose.'

'Now, Dad?' Dickie asked, crowding between his father's knees.

Dan hugged him briefly. 'Wait just a second.' He hunted

through the rumpled pile of newspaper, pulled out the front section, and walked over to the chintz-covered sofa where Kitty sat reading. Her legs were pulled up under her, and she had not pinned up her hair, which hung loosely and unevenly about her neck, and she looked young in her white housecoat.

He sat down beside her and pointed to a column of print. 'I can still be called up any time. See?'

Kitty glanced at the newspaper and said quickly, 'It's just the same as it was, isn't it? Isn't it just the same? They won't actually be needing you yet a while.'

'Kit, we've been all through this, time and again. But — well, I can't see ahead for *you*, even now. And of course I want to do my share. If they need me, I'll go — of course.' He was looking around the pleasant living-room, flooded with morning sunshine, at the garlands of tinsel on the tree and the holly strung in the doorways, and suddenly he reached out and seized Margie, who had left her animals and was standing before him, and held her against his chest.

Dickie was watching. 'What's going to happen?' he asked.

'Nothing, dear,' Kitty said.

'How about that train, Dick?' Dan asked abruptly. The children followed him into the small sun parlor off the living-room. It was empty; rug, furniture and plants had all been removed, everything but the green and yellow flowered draperies.

'How're you going to do it?' Dickie asked as he stared at the sheets of plywood stacked against the wall.

'Just nail them down. Let's see — hammer, nails, screw-driver, tacks for the tracks, tack hammer — you bring the tracks from under the tree.'

'They're here, they're all ready, they've been waiting ——'

'Trains, too? Okay. I'll get the tools.' He went out.

'Dickie,' Kitty called. She patted the place beside her on the sofa. 'Sit here, dear.'

'You read to me, Mummie?' Margie asked, holding a book she had picked up from under the tree.

'Six-year-olds,' Kitty said emphatically to the boy, 'almost always have the wind-up kind of train, and ——'

'But *mine's* electric,' Dickie exclaimed.

'Yes, but the point is, Dickie, that you really are too young. Only we thought we couldn't get another until after the war, and that may be quite a while. Even the plywood, you see, Dickie, was hard to get. You can't just call up and get things any more.'

'Why did we need the plywood?'

'The floor is warped, and an electric train needs a smooth floor. You've been very patient ——'

'What does the war need plywood for?'

'I don't know. Airplanes to bomb the Nazis. No, it couldn't be planes. Gliders, perhaps. But the point is, Dickie,' she said firmly, 'we expect you to take care of the train as though you were eight or ten, a big boy.'

Dan came back with the tools. He had put on sneakers and an old gray flannel shirt. Dickie jumped to his feet.

The panels of plywood had been cut to the shape of the sun parlor, and in a few minutes Dan had them in place and started to nail them down. Kitty pulled a chair up to the French doors of the sun parlor and sat down with the newspaper. The children crowded round their father as he moved about on his knees.

'Don't eat those nails,' Dickie said happily.

Dan glanced at him and grinned, the nails between his teeth, and went on pounding. Finally he stood up. 'There, Dick, that's done. Now where are the tracks?'

Margie stood beside her mother. 'You read to me?' she asked, fidgeting on one leg and still holding her book. When her mother did not look up from the newspaper, Margie went back to the tree and pushed the intricately carved sheep and cows into a heap.

'How's that?' Dan asked when the tracks had been laid out in a large oval in the center of which he squatted with his son.

"'Christmas week bombings terrific,'" Kitty read aloud. She looked up. 'Can anything be left of those cities, anything at all?'

Dan came into the living-room and took a cigarette from a box.

"'Blockbuster!'" said Kitty, and shuddered. 'What a dreadful word! Oh, Dan, what'll we do when ——'

Dickie, who had been listening to them, came out with two pieces of track in his hands. 'Is this the way?' He tried to join them.

'Just a second, Dick. Let me have this cigarette.' To Kitty he said, 'When I go ——'

Margie looked up from the animals. 'Where you going, Daddy?'

'This isn't the time, I guess,' Dan said to Kitty.

'You want to be a soldier, Dad?' Dickie asked, looking at him with interest.

'Who said anything about being a soldier?'

'Would we move? Could I take the train?'

'Come on, let's get the tracks together.' He finished his cigarette and they went back into the sun parlor and Dan began to join the sections of track.

'I'll help,' Dickie said. He tried to fasten two pieces of track and was still struggling with them when Dan, half the oval completed, grasped one of them. 'Oh,' he said, and crawled around the circle to work the other way.

At last Dickie got his two pieces together and began to fasten them to the large section which Dan had already finished. He lifted the end of the arc of track off the floor and it suddenly fell apart. Dan looked up, and his jaws tightened. He spoke in a low, exasperated voice. 'Damn it, Dick, that's not helping. I don't intend to work at this thing all day.'

Dickie dropped the track and looked at the floor. 'It's my train,' he murmured.

Dan stood up. 'Okay, you set it up.' He started to walk away. Dickie watched him despairingly.

'Or do you want to let me do it?' Dan asked firmly.

'You do it,' Dickie said, and slid back against the wall. Then, as something snapped and crackled in the living-room, they turned to look. Margie had stepped on the fragile animals, and two of them lay on the floor in splinters.

'Oh, Margie!' Kitty wailed, standing over them. 'Those were mine! I've had those ever since I was *little*! You just won't learn to keep away from my *things*.' She swooped down and picked up the child. 'You sit in the hall until you really *want* to be in here with us,' she said. Margie was howling.

Kitty plumped her down on the bottom step of the stairway in the hall and came angrily back into the living-room. She picked up the fragments of painted wood and looked at them in her hands. 'How maddening! My grandmother brought these things to me from Switzerland when I was a little girl. Really ——'

Dan was grinning a little. 'Things,' he said. 'Do things matter?' And the smile left his face as once more he looked lingeringly at the living-room, and his eyes fastened on the wax flowers under a Victorian glass dome on the mantel. 'I guess they do,' he said.

Kitty dropped the wreckage into a wastebasket. 'No,' she said, 'they don't, of course.'

In the hall, Margie was sobbing, and Dickie was looking at his mother accusingly. 'She didn't *mean* to do it.'

Kitty stared at him and suddenly she said, 'Of course she didn't. Things! Dickie, I'm ashamed of myself. Losing my temper over a few broken sheep. Oh, I *am* ashamed! Margie, come back,' she called, and sat down again. Margie, sniffing, walked stiffly past her mother and on into the sun parlor where Dan was fastening the track to the plywood

with carpet tacks. Dickie had emptied all the cartons which had been stacked in a corner, and put their contents in the center of the oval — the transformer, the tunnel, the trains — engine, coal car, tanker, gondola car and caboose. They looked bright and new in the sunlight.

‘This piece isn’t very definite, Dan. I still don’t believe they’ll need you for a while,’ said Kitty.

‘Why don’t you face it, Kit? And forget it.’

The newspaper rattled into her lap and her face suddenly seemed much older. ‘But Dan — I don’t mean I want to keep you here — if they need you. I’m sure I could find *some* work somewhere, and the children ——’

‘I want you to look at this engine,’ Dan said abruptly to Dickie.

‘I did — lots,’ he said absently, but he was staring at his mother, and he asked, ‘What did you say?’

‘Look at it closely,’ Dan said, tugging at his sleeve. He picked up the engine. It was solid and heavy, beautifully designed, a perfect model. ‘Look in there, Dick. Delicate as a watch. You’ve got to handle it carefully.’

‘I know it.’

‘Well, let’s connect the transformer.’ He pulled a jack-knife and a coil of fine wire from his pocket, cut the wire into two even lengths, pared the insulation off the ends, connected the two bare ends with the plate fastened under the tracks and the two other ends with the transformer. ‘Now we line up the trains.’ He put all the cars on the track and joined the fine couplings. ‘Now you have to be sure that all the wheels are on the track, and especially these.’

The children and their father were all on their knees, staring under the engine.

‘Now look at this,’ Dan said, pointing to a small lever on the top of the engine. ‘When it’s in the middle, it’s in neutral. This side is reverse. This side is forward. Always have it in the middle when you plug in the transformer. Then move it to forward. See?’

Dickie nodded breathlessly.

'Plug in the transformer,' Dan said, pointing to an electric outlet in the baseboard.

Suddenly the little headlight on the engine flashed on and the motor began to hum. 'There she is,' Dan said. 'Ready?'

The children were hopping with excitement.

'Okay!' Dan pushed the lever. The train began to move, then quickly picked up speed, and when it reached the first curve in the oval track, rushed off, dashed against the wall and toppled on its side, its wheels spinning and the motor buzzing loudly.

'Too much speed,' Dan said. He adjusted the switch on the transformer, picked up the cars, put them back on the tracks, connected those that had become uncoupled in the spill, and said, 'All right, here we go.' Once more he moved the lever.

Just then Margie screamed, 'The tunnel!' She grabbed the forgotten tunnel and put it over the track, but before she could straighten it, the train had bumped into it and once more crashed off the tracks, all the cars on their sides again, the wheels spinning.

'God damn it,' Dan said. 'All right, Margie. You get off there to the side and stay put. There are too many of us here.'

'Come out with me,' Kitty called, but Margie backed against the windows of the sun parlor and stood there.

Once more Dan put the train in order, and this time it stayed on the track until it came to the curve. Once more it dashed across the floor, against the wall, and spilled.

'Still too fast,' Dan said.

He adjusted the transformer and went through the whole business again. This time the train barely crept along the track, but it went around the entire oval, and then for the second time passed safely over the treacherous curve. Dan touched the transformer, and the train picked up a little

speed. Margie came closer, and both children jiggled with excitement, and when the engine came to the curve, it crashed once more.

'God damn it!' Dan cried, loudly this time. He bent down closely over the crucial curve and examined the tracks. 'Nothing wrong here,' he said. 'They're tight as anything.'

'Dan ——' Kitty said from the door.

'Let's try it again. Now both of you keep quiet. Don't hop up and down.'

Dickie and Margie stood side by side against the wall and watched Dan put the cars together again and push the lever. Slowly the train started forward and picked up speed. As it came toward them, both children held their breath, clenched their fists tightly, and then, as it passed them, began to jig. The train dashed off the tracks at the curve.

Dan was kneeling tensely in the center of the oval. His face was bright red. He seized the engine in his hand and began to shout at the children. 'God *damn* it, can't you do as you're told? I told you not to hop! You *shake* it off! Do you want this damned train or don't you? I'll *smash* ——'

'Dan!' Kitty cried.

He looked up at her. Then he looked at the children. Margie's lips were trembling and tears were in her eyes, but Dickie was standing up straight, his eyes meeting his father's, staring at him.

'Dan,' Kitty said.

He put the train down, pulled the plug of the transformer, and walked out. Kitty followed him into the dining-room.

'Dan,' she said, 'it wasn't the children. I tried to tell you. From where I sat, I suddenly saw that the plywood right there slopes, just the way the floor under it does. We'd better get a carpenter.'

Dan's face was white now, and his hands were trembling as he clutched the neck of a decanter and poured whisky into a tall glass. He drank it quickly.

'You mustn't lose your temper that way, especially over objects. It really was the engine you were outraged about, not the children. You really mustn't, Dan. Oh, darling . . .'

He looked away from her at the leaves of the laurel wreath in the center of the mahogany dining-table. 'Holidays! It wasn't even the engine, I'm afraid. Kit, I'm losing my ——' 'What's that pounding?'

Then Margie was crying out to them from the door of the dining-room. 'Dickie's — Dickie's — Dickie is ——' She could not finish what she was trying to say, but her parents did not wait. They rushed past her, through the living-room, to the doors of the sun parlor. They saw Dickie kneeling on the floor, Dan's heavy hammer in his hands, slamming it over and over with methodical fury on what was left of the engine, and shouting, 'I'm a Nazi bomber! I'm a Nazi bomber!'

Dan, leaning weakly against the door frame, watched him without saying anything. But Kitty was crying.

Dickie looked up. His face was red, and he was biting his lip. He lifted the hammer again and struck it with a bang against the wreckage. Defiantly, he lifted it once more, but this time he brought it down less heavily. Then, still looking at his parents, he began to cry. 'I'm ashamed,' he sobbed as the hammer fell from his hands. The tears streamed down his flushed face, and he sobbed again, 'I'm ashamed! I'm ashamed!'

Dan dropped to his knees and seized the boy's hands. 'No, don't be, Dickie, don't be, please,' he whispered urgently. 'I'm the one, Dickie, I'm the one.'

'And I,' Kitty cried, 'and I!'



## 24

### *Continued Humid*

**A**LBERT SAMPSON was waiting for a student late one summer afternoon in his office in Morris House, the white clapboard building which sheltered the Romance Language Department of the New England college in which he taught. He had, for the moment, forgotten the heat outside. His office was on the north side of the building, and in the afternoon a row of old elm trees just outside the windows kept it dark and relatively cool; also, he had come across the yearbook of his class, 1930, while straightening his shelves, and now, sitting behind his desk with his chair tipped back against the sill of the open window, he was looking at his photograph in the book.

He could not see any great difference between his face then and the way he looked now; the face in the photograph was more eager, of course, more open, yet not really different. His hair, perhaps, was thinner now, receding at the temples, but he still wore a crew cut. The eyes looked at him from the picture with the same easy candor with which, he supposed, he still looked out at the world. But when he glanced at the print under the photograph, his gray-green eyes narrowed, and the lines on either side of his mouth, wrinkles formed by a characteristic smile, deepened into fretfulness. 'Most Popular Man. . . . Destiny: brilliant critic or novelist.' Thirteen years. And he was now an instructor in French at thirty-one hundred a year, without prospects of promotion or of a raise in salary.

The ringing of the telephone on his desk was so startling to him that the book slammed shut and the front legs of his chair came down on the floor with a bang.

It was Sally, his wife. 'Albert,' she said, 'there's a letter for you from the Army Air Forces. Shall I open it and read it to you?'

His breath stopped in his throat. He hesitated. Then he said, 'No, I'll come right home,' and started to put the instrument down.

'Oh, Albert ——'

'Yes?'

'Bring a loaf of whole-wheat bread on your way, and a small melon.'

'Yes,' he said.

'And stop at Larkin's to see if they've repaired the electric fan. The heat has had the baby howling all afternoon.'

'Yes,' he said again.

He got up quickly, pulled on the seersucker jacket which hung on the back of a chair, and rushed into the corridor and out of the building. Outside, on the steps, the heavy, damp heat of the August afternoon struck him with the force of a blast. He groaned softly and looked up at the pallid sky; its vast insipidity promised no relief. Sweat broke out all over his body. He pulled a damp, wrinkled handkerchief from the hip pocket of his gray flannel trousers and wiped it across his eyes.

When he looked up he saw Richard Crane running toward him along the path that led to the steps where he had paused. 'Sorry I'm late, sir,' Crane said, panting. He was sweating, too, and, like Albert, mopping his face. 'I wanted to say good-bye.'

'Where are you going?'

'Fort Devens, sir. Tomorrow.'

'You've been drafted? But I thought you were 4F.'

'I was reclassified last month.'

‘Oh. Well, look, walk along with me.’

They went down the path between neatly boxed hedges toward the main quadrangle of the campus.

‘When it’s over,’ Crane said, ‘I want to come back and do some more work with you on Racine, if you’ll have me.’

‘Racine,’ Albert said speculatively, and then, ‘Crane, I don’t care, you know, if I never hear of Racine again.’

The boy looked at him with solemn surprise. ‘Why ——’ he said, but Albert interrupted him.

‘You see, Crane, I’m going in too.’

‘Into the Army?’

‘I’ve applied for a commission. Army Air Corps.’ Albert’s voice was elated. ‘They need instructors. Of course, I may not get it — everyone isn’t getting a commission now, the way it was a while back — but even so, in my interview the officer said my chances were good. I’ll be teaching straight technical subjects. If I teach, that is.’

‘But if the commission is *for* teaching ——’

‘Oh, that. I’ve been told it doesn’t matter much. If they like your looks, they put you in action. I know men from the last war who went in this way and then found themselves at the front.’

‘I see,’ Crane said quietly.

‘And you can see, too, can’t you, Crane, what it makes of Racine? And of all this?’ Albert swept his arm out in a semi-circle.

They were now in the quadrangle, nearly deserted in the hot, late afternoon. The Georgian buildings, standing tidily on the brilliant grass, among the well-kept, symmetrical trees, looked like enormous dolls’ houses.

‘All dead, Crane. Pretty and dead.’

‘What about your book on the Symbolists?’

‘I’ve lost interest. That’s why I haven’t any future here. They think I’m lazy. They think I haven’t lived up to my promise. But with this ahead of me, I can tell you what I think, and it’s to hell with them.’

The boy's eyes, behind his spectacles, were puzzled and hurt. As he and Albert emerged from the quadrangle, he said, 'Here's where I turn.'

'I'm afraid I talked mostly about myself. Good luck, Crane. Maybe we'll meet somewhere. And don't worry, Racine will keep.'

They shook hands, and Crane, as if he suddenly felt shy, ducked his head and swung off in the direction of his dormitory. Albert began to whistle and walked rapidly away toward his home.

The Sampsons lived on the second floor of an old house which had been converted into flats. It was painted an intensely ugly color, a nearly mustard yellow, and whenever Albert approached the building, he found himself doing so with repugnance. But today he did not notice. He watched the newsboy swing close to the curb on his bicycle, throw the evening paper up on the steps, and then wheel out into the street again. As Albert came closer, he saw Claudia, his six-year-old daughter, playing aimlessly on the steps with some bits of gravel she had picked up from the drive. One cheek had a gray smudge on it and wisps of her brown hair had escaped from her pigtails, which were neat and tight in the mornings but disarrayed by afternoon. He saw that her hands were grimy. He bent down and kissed her and, more cheerfully than usual, said, 'Hello, darling.' He picked up the newspaper and ran up the steps. Claudia followed him in.

Albert saw the letter at once on the cluttered telephone table in the hall, a long white envelope which seemed faintly luminous in the gloom of the dark corridor. He picked it up and walked into the living room. The baby, whimpering and nearly naked, was in his play pen in the middle of the room and Sally was working at her desk.

'Hello, darling,' Albert said.

'What did the letter say?' Sally asked eagerly.

'I haven't read it yet,' he answered. He dropped the newspaper in a chair and kept on walking.

Claudia came in after him, holding a doll. 'Daddy, fix my doll's ——' she began, but Albert was already in the back hall. He went into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

In the bedroom he waited, with his back against the door, the letter in one hand. Then he walked over to his bureau, which stood between two windows. He looked at his name on the envelope and he saw how the envelope was shaking. He looked away from it and his glance fell on the unused gifts on his bureau top. Sally and he had agreed, before his birthday a few weeks ago, that he had better be given things which he would need when he 'got in.' The pigskin toilet case was from Sally, the writing kit of durable imitation leather was from Claudia, the black wallet, small enough to fit in a hip pocket and equipped with transparent flaps for all the identification cards one needed to carry, was from the friends who had been asked to his birthday dinner, and the cellophane money belt, which had cost a dollar and nineteen cents, was, Claudia had insisted, from the baby. Albert looked at these things and abruptly tore off one end of the envelope.

A glance was enough. The phrases leaped out at him: '... duly considered ... so many applicants with a high degree of technical training ... cannot now consider ...' He crumpled the letter in his fist, put his arms on the bureau, and laid his head down on them.

When he straightened up, he looked at the gifts again, and presently he opened the top drawer of the bureau, where he kept his neckties and handkerchiefs, and pushed the toilet case, the writing kit, the wallet, and the money belt into it. The crumpled letter he stuffed into his pocket. He walked to the door and stared at it, and at last he went back to the living room. The baby was crying.

Sally looked up from the papers on her desk. 'Did you get

the fan? Bobby's miserable and I've been too busy all day to take him out.'

'I forgot,' he said dully, 'and I forgot the groceries, too.'

'Oh, Albert!'

'Daddy, look,' Claudia said. She thrust her damaged doll into his hands and held out its wig to him, a matted, carrot-colored cap of imitation hair. Albert glanced at the curious bald head of the doll.

'Well,' Sally said, 'one of us will have to go for them. We haven't any bread and we haven't any dessert. But first I want you to look at these.'

'What?' Albert asked, and turning to Claudia, he said, 'Put Bobby's toys back in his play pen and keep him quiet.'

'These bills ——'

'Oh, Lord.' He dropped the doll into a chair, picked up the newspaper, and glanced at the weather report. "'Continued humid.'" Christ, I'll go crazy,' he said. He took off his coat and opened the collar of his shirt. 'Isn't there anything we can do about this apartment? It's as damp as a cellar.'

'Albert,' Sally said, 'this is the last liquor bill we can pay. We'll have to cut out drinking entirely, even when we have guests. Everything's become so expensive, and all the talk about easy money and high wages just doesn't fit us. Your salary is just what it was three years ago, but prices ——'

'Sally, don't,' he said. He was looking at her dress, of blue cotton with a mild little pink flower printed all over it. Then he looked at her bare feet under the desk, and her shoes, lying where she had kicked them off. And finally, he looked at her face, white and tired, without makeup, drawn.

'I mean it, Albert. And that isn't all. I've got to let the cleaning woman go, and I've got to do more of the laundry myself — all but your shirts. We just can't run bills like these any more. I'm at the point where I juggle one against the other, figure out which one can slide or which one I can

pay just part of, and it gets worse every month. I won't live that way.'

'Is that all right, Daddy?' Claudia asked. She had put the toys back in the pen, and for the moment, while the baby threw them out again, he was quiet. Albert saw that his diaper was wet.

'Thanks,' he said to Claudia.

'And now will you fix my doll?' asked Claudia. 'There's some glue in your desk.'

'Did you hear what I said, Albert?' Sally asked, looking at his face, which seemed listless and dull.

'No,' he said.

She stood up angrily, and he noticed how small she was without shoes. 'You have a streak of absolute infantilism, you know. Darling, we can't *pretend* we have more money than we've got. We can't drink liquor we can't buy or hire a cleaning woman we can't pay. You just won't *face* anything. But I can't live on fantasy. I've even thought this afternoon of putting the children in one room and renting the other to some student.'

'Sally, for God's sake ——'

'Oh,' she said, surprised, 'what did the letter say?'

His face became suddenly alive again. 'I was turned down,' he said, and then, in a rising voice, he cried, 'But don't worry, they'll get me yet. I'll be drafted! This war isn't over by a long shot! Don't you worry!'

She drew in her breath sharply and backed away a step as she saw his eyes, narrowed, and burning at her with a kind of wildness.



## 25

### *The Air of Success*

LIKE AN AIR OF SUCCESS,' said Roger Shaw into the darkness. It was eight o'clock on a warm evening in early October, and, except that black night had already shut down utterly and that a persistent wind moaned through the trees, it would have seemed like summer still. 'That dining room is always empty,' Roger went on as he led the way up the path to the cottage. 'It's depressing.' The wind made his words sound small and remote.

The Wentworths, picking their way along behind Lucia Shaw, said nothing, and Lucia made another of those sniffing sounds which they had all heard ever since they left the inn where, as a farewell gesture, the Wentworths had taken the Shaws to dine.

'How have they kept that place going all summer?' Roger demanded almost angrily. They were walking along the side of the house toward the back porch, where a light was burning, and when Lucia blew her nose firmly, Roger said quickly, 'In an empty dining room like that, you have to whisper, or the waitresses hear everything you say.'

'They wouldn't have been fascinated by our conversation,' Lucia said quietly and rather thickly. 'We should apologize to the Wentworths. Our domestic problems are pretty dull.' She turned her face away from the others as they came into the light, as though she were engrossed in the curious shadows of waving branches on the ground in the open space behind the cottage.

'What are you going to do?' Perry Wentworth, who had asked the question twice at dinner, said again.

'God knows!' Roger answered, desperately, at last, and almost violently pulled open the screen door. He held it for the others.

The light fell on a chair placed just inside the porch door. 'What's this?' asked Lucia. On the chair was an empty milk bottle, and in the bottle, a piece of white paper. Lucia took the paper, pushed the chair aside, and led the way in. She looked at the note. It had been written by Judy, her eight-year-old daughter, who had been left alone with Peter, the two-year-old. Lucia read it aloud. "'Mummie, call Washington. Operator 46. They called twice.'"

'Washington?' Roger asked.

'Washington,' Lucia said, puzzled. 'I haven't been there for nine years. Who could it be?'

Aline looked at the paper. 'What a wonderful child Judy is!' she said. 'To take a message like that, and leave that note.'

'Independence is a virtue which the poor develop early,' Roger said with a sour smile.

'Oh, listen!' Perry protested, frowning.

The four of them walked through the kitchen into the living room of the cottage. Aline Wentworth went straight to a wicker sofa. She was wearing a large black hat which dipped down over her face, hiding her eyes unless she raised her head high, and a dress with narrow black and white stripes, and short white gloves. She took some children's things off the sofa — a soiled yellow rabbit, some sort of cart, a pink sweater and a pair of damp training pants, and a few blocks — stopped to unfasten the straps of her high-heeled sandals, stretched out full length, and then pulled off her gloves and kicked off her shoes. She did not remove her hat. The shoes lay on the floor among the toys.

Lucia walked to the stairs where the telephone was. She

stood there hesitating, her hand on her mouth, and her reddened eyes looking helplessly toward Roger.

‘Go ahead,’ Roger said.

‘But I don’t know anybody in Washington. It’s nine years since I worked there. Who could it be?’

‘There’s only one way to find out,’ Roger said impatiently. He picked up the telephone. ‘This is Stamford 6-2003,’ he said. ‘You have a Washington call for Mrs. Roger Shaw. Operator 46.’

He handed the telephone to Lucia. She sat down slowly on the lowest step on the stairway and put the instrument on her knees. In her ankle socks and moccasins and her simple gingham dress, her figure looked like a young girl’s, but her plain, vaguely pretty face was tired and drab.

The men stood in front of the empty fireplace, looking at Lucia and then at one another and saying nothing.

‘All lines to Washington are busy. They’ll call me,’ Lucia said, dropping wearily into a wicker chair with faded cretonne pillows.

The men sat down. Lucia found her knitting among the magazines in the open arm of her chair, and her lips moved rapidly, silently, as she worked her needles. For a few minutes no one said anything, and the tapping of a branch against a window pane was the only sound. It was the end of the week-end; and the Wentworths, who were going back to New Haven in the morning, should have gone twelve hours earlier, when heavy silences such as that now settling on the room had not occurred.

Perry stirred uneasily in his chair. ‘What do you think you will do?’ he asked Roger once more.

‘What can we do? I guess we’re going on with Wentworth charity.’

‘There’s no charity. Don’t say that. This cottage is yours for as long as you want it. It’s no good to us. We haven’t even used it in the summer for six years, let alone at this time

of year. But it doesn't solve anything for you. With no heating system, you'll be freezing before long. You can't stay on much longer.'

'If only we didn't have to decide so *soon*,' Lucia said complainingly. 'If only we had a few more months' grace, *something* might happen. Fate, or *something*!'

'But like what?' asked Aline from under her hat.

'Well, sometime Roger's pictures will start to sell. He has four or five in New York now. Any day someone might buy one. And once we get started . . .'

Her voice trailed off and no one encouraged her to go on. The branch tapped suggestively at the window.

Presently Aline sat up. 'Lucia, let me take Judy back, as I've asked you. Just until you decide what you *are* going to do. She's missed several weeks of school already, and she'll miss more before you leave here, won't she? Honestly, I'd love having her. She can have the guest room absolutely to herself, and I'll take wonderful care of her. You know I adore her.' Aline's flat voice had grown eager and breathless as she talked.

'You haven't the remotest notion, Aline, of the trouble a child is, or how Judy would mess up that lovely place of yours, with everything so perfect. It's kind of you ——'

'It's not kind at all. It's selfish. Really, I'd love to have a child in our house.'

Lucia looked dubiously at Roger. 'Well, perhaps we'll have to, for a few weeks ——'

Perry spoke firmly. 'Roger, I'm going around tomorrow and see if you can't get something in the University again.'

'No,' Roger said hopelessly. 'That's out. When I left for the Navy, they told me my appointment was over. Now I'm out of the Navy, but also a job. Anyway, years ago I swore that when the job *was* over, I was going to stop teaching the stuff and start doing it instead.'

'If only ——' Lucia began, dropping her knitting into her

lap. 'We should be the Wentworths, and the Wentworths us.'

'Why?' Aline asked.

'With children, it's frightening to cut loose this way. I'm a simple homebody and I like things settled.' She spoke rapidly and nervously, as if talking relieved her. 'There are jobs, of course. I've tried to persuade Roger to go to Hartford or Bridgeport and see what he could get — in his line, of course. Industrial designing, or something. But naturally he hates to until we're *really* strapped. Roger, who could that call be from? Washington! I can't imagine. It makes me nervous.'

Aline took off her hat and shook out her loose black hair. 'We forgot to tell you,' she said to the men, 'that Lucia and I picked up two soldiers on the beach this afternoon.'

'You did,' Lucia said. 'No strange man has looked at me for years.'

Aline said, 'We were the only people down there, and these boys came along and asked if we were busy. I said we were, but they sat down anyway.'

Lucia went on, 'I tried to discourage them. I told them we were talking about husbands and children and houses. But they sat right down, one on either side of Aline, and watched her painting her glamorous toenails. They didn't say anything to me.' She glanced nervously over her shoulder at the telephone.

Aline, in her bare feet, walked to a table where there were cigarettes. She lit one and came back to the sofa. 'Husbands,' she said. 'You know, Perry is funny. He doesn't like the word. When I say, "I'll ask my husband," or "This is my husband," he gets annoyed. He wants me to say *Mr.* Wentworth to people we don't know well enough to say "Perry" to.'

The Shaws looked at Perry. 'Husband,' Perry said. 'I don't like the sound of it.'

Aline raised herself on her elbow. 'He objects to the mid-

dle-class overtones. He doesn't like to be catalogued as Husband Wentworth. I don't blame him.'

'And you,' Roger said rather harshly, 'you are not his wife, but his mistress. Isn't it all out of a novel of the twenties?'

Lucia giggled, and Perry changed the subject. 'Were the soldiers interesting? Did they have anything to say? About politics, or anything?'

Lucia, who had been worriedly staring at Roger, broke in. 'Do you know the Huebers? Talk about husband! Fanny Hueber never uses Jack's name at all. She always says, "Husband likes this," and "Husband wants me to do that." And giggles. It's ridiculous. Like old Irish women, always saying "Mister" instead of Tim or Dan. Or like *Mein Herr*, only coy.'

Aline said, 'Christ!'

Roger was looking broodingly at his feet, and Lucia, watching him still, said suddenly, 'I'm like Fanny,' and went quickly to his chair and kissed him on the neck. She sat on the arm of the chair and smoothed his thin, reddish hair. 'Cheer up,' she said to him.

'You're nothing like her!' Aline said. 'Women like Fanny Hueber make me want to say something coarse.'

'You know her? I never saw her at your house. But then, she wouldn't have been there. You always have such smart parties.'

'Nonsense,' said Aline.

'Of course, you do. Everything in your life is perfect, and you *have* everything. Your parties are as smart as you are, and as your house is. With all that glass, and the Aalto designs, and everything.' Lucia was looking at her with frank admiration. But as she continued to look at Aline, her lips tightened, and her expression changed. 'It pays, doesn't it, if you can afford it, in a college,' she said, with deliberate pauses, 'to entertain well, and to have the right people only.'

Aline looked up sharply. 'That's mean, Lucia,' she said,

'and if you really think that I've had anything to do with Perry's success, it's also foolish.'

'Oh, I didn't, dear!' Lucia protested, and she was looking at Aline admiringly again. 'Oh, I *didn't* mean that.'

Aline threw her cigarette into the fireplace, and with a slight twitch about her mouth, she looked around the shabby cottage room, with its washed-out cretonne, its sagging wicker furniture, its cracked and faded wallpaper, and all the evidence of children. 'As a matter of fact, I'm tired of our apartment,' she said. 'It's too hard and bright. The next time we move, I'm going to have a bed with an organdy canopy. All that glass, as you say. I'm tired of it.'

She stood up and walked to the mirror over the mantel, where she applied a smooth layer of lipstick to her mouth as briskly as if she were washing her face or her hands. She had just finished when the telephone rang, and she turned to watch Lucia walk over to it. Lucia's face was apprehensive as she picked up the telephone, but then suddenly she smiled, and the next moment she cried, 'Why, Evelyn Masters, what in the world!'

Aline lay down on the sofa again, crossing her long legs and gazing down at her crimson toenails. Lucia was saying, 'All right, Evelyn. I'm listening.'

Roger and the Wentworths could hear the woman's rapid, distant voice. Lucia was nodding, and at last she said, 'Of course I'm interested, Evelyn. When would it start?' She paused, and then she said, 'Oh, dear. But I'm probably no good any more, it's been *years!*'

Roger Shaw looked interested. He walked over to Lucia and sat beside her on the step. 'How much?' he said. 'Ask her how much.'

'How much, Evelyn?' Lucia asked, and in a moment put the telephone against her flat chest and said, 'Four thousand and overtime. About forty-four hundred, we could figure.' And then she said into the telephone, 'Can I call you back to-

morrow, Evelyn? We've got to talk this over. Okay? Good. And thanks a million.' She put the telephone down and stood up. 'Well!'

'Tell all,' said Perry.

Roger was hovering eagerly beside her. 'What is it, Lucia, what is it?'

'It was Evelyn Masters. She was my boss in the Department of Agriculture before Roger and I were married. Nine years ago. Now she's organizing some new office. She heard through someone that we were on the loose. A writing job is open, and she wants me for it. She said she's never found anybody she could work with as well as me. I haven't even seen her for five years. Forty-four hundred.' She sat down.

'How lovely,' Aline said.

'Wonderful,' said Perry. 'Doesn't that solve everything?'

Lucia was looking at Roger. 'What do you think?'

'What do *I* think?'

'I was just thinking of the hours. They're hard. Eight-thirty to five in the office, every day. It means practically never seeing the children, having no sort of home, really. We'd probably have to live way out somewhere, and what with transportation, it would be seven to seven, or worse, for me. But the children could go to good schools, Judy to the Friends' School, and Peter to a good government nursery school. But I don't know. What an awful life!'

'But ——' said Roger.

'What?' And when he did not answer, she said, 'Oh, yes! The advantages! I know. The money, and the leisure for you, and nothing to worry about, and you could paint in peace. Oh, yes!'

'I don't want to push you into it ——'

'I'm going to take it! You've supported us for nine years, and now I'm going to do it for a while. We can have a part-time nurse.' She took a deep breath and straightened out

her shoulders. 'I'll feel that I'm doing something important, even if it is slavery. You know, it makes me feel wonderful — that Evelyn should pick me out. Out of all the people she must have had under her in the last ten years. It's something, knowing that you can still get a good job, that you're actually sought out — and for a useful, civic thing.' She looked at Aline's inert and handsome form.

'It's that "something" we've been waiting for,' Roger said, very gently, persuasively. 'It's fate, taking over for us.' The wind suddenly whistled around a corner of the cottage, and he added, 'Winter can come now.'

Aline twisted her shoulders and looked at them. 'But now I don't get Judy,' she said sadly. 'Again, we ought to be turned around. I could take the job, and there'd be no household to worry about.'

Lucia was staring thoughtfully at Aline's shoes where they lay among the toys on the floor, and suddenly she picked one of them up by its strap and held it dangling in front of her, as if it were some sort of small dead animal. 'Those barbaric heels!' she exclaimed derisively. 'Look, Roger!'

The shoe had a thick platform sole and a square, patent leather heel at least five inches tall. There was nothing more to it than a network of patent leather thongs at the toe and an ankle strap.

'Look, Roger,' Lucia said again, with curious elation, and the two of them, standing close together, watched the shoe dangle at the end of its strap as Lucia held it gingerly before her.

'Barbaric, but pretty,' said Perry.

'Pretty?' Lucia echoed.

'Well, they're not for an Indian maiden in the woods. If that's what you mean. Not that kind of pretty,' Perry said.

'They ruin your posture,' Roger said.

'What's the fuss?' asked Aline. 'They're old shoes.'

Roger said humorously, 'They also destroy your Achilles'

tendon, and they do dreadful things to your female organs.' 'What is this?' Aline said dully.

Suddenly Lucia was looking very bright, and with her small mouth drawn into a smile of fixed sweetness, hesitated, but then said what was on her mind: 'You forget Aline's operation, or didn't you know?'

Aline turned her face away and Perry said quickly, 'High heels do something for a woman's foot. They raise the arch. Like ballet slippers. The arch is a famous point of beauty.' Lucia seemed not to be listening. She had one arm around Roger's waist, and was leaning against him, and she was saying thoughtfully, 'You know, Perry, those soldiers were stupid. You were asking about their ideas. They didn't have any. They were really stupid, *dull*. They didn't say one thing that indicated any kind of interest in the world around them. Or did they, Aline?'

And Roger, for the first time that night, looked contented. He put his arm around Lucia's waist, as hers was around his, and he said good-naturedly, 'Oh, well, the army, you know, takes in practically anybody,' and he laughed happily.

Lucia dropped the shoe clatteringly to the floor, and turning to him, so that they were very nearly embracing, she said as happily as he, 'Husband is cute.'

The branch tapped slyly at the window, and Aline, lying flat on the couch, turned her white face to Perry as if for help, looked at him with eyes which might have been begging that he save her from drowning.

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## *The Threshold of Pain*

THE HIGH HILL on which the house was situated still blazed with sunlight, the green lawn as brilliant as if it were dyed, red gold glinting off the windows of the barn; but in the valleys all around evening was gathering in black pools and the tall pines were indigo. Here on the hill all objects had a last lovely separateness and clarity — flowers, leaves, flagstones, each rock in the wall, a robin that chirped aimlessly on a slender branch; but below them everything was merging, outlines fading, all separateness being obliterated by the chilly encroachment of Vermont night. Slowly the hill and then the house would be engulfed. It was the most difficult part of the day for Julia Milton, and now she felt her helplessness as if it were a physical attribute, felt it in the way she felt her size, her smallness, her neat little body.

Her son was watching her. He repeated his question finally. 'Where is he now? Do we know?'

She picked up the magazine he had spread out on the porch step where he was sitting and glanced at the advertisement which had brought the question to his mind. It showed a medical officer giving plasma to a wounded soldier on a battlefield, with palm trees, smashed like broken spears, jagged against a blasted sky. Julia closed the magazine and tossed it up on the narrow porch. 'The Pacific is the biggest sea,' she said with inappropriate brightness, and her incompetence dismayed her; but she went on. 'It has so many

islands. I know a city that's an island. Hongkong. It's like the top of a mountain, jutting out of the sea.'

She could not keep his interest. As she spoke, she saw his glance slide away from her face, first to her thumb, because he hated pain and was unable to resist reminders of it, to the clumsy bandage over the burn which she had awkwardly given herself on the range, then down to his sneakers, and at last across the lawn to the old barn, smoky gray and rubbed with pink by the late afternoon light. She could see, in the sudden kindling of his eyes, his desire to be there in the barn, some plan suddenly formulated . . . But she could bring that glance back to her! 'All the fighting is, of course, on islands.' He looked at her at once, sharply. 'Japan is a group of islands. The Philippines are islands. Manila . . .'

Before she got farther, Tom and, now, Kate, too, were looking away from her, staring down at the ground at the foot of the steps. Somewhat dreamily they were watching two large black ants lugging a third dead one across the stone path.

She sighed, and her voice rose with feeling as she said, 'Manila is a lovely city. It is the whitest city in the world. After your father and I were married, we went around the world, and we lived in Manila for two weeks.'

Both children looked at her again, but she thought it was not because of what she had said but because her voice had become a little shrill. Should she tell them now of storms that came off the Pacific, bending and twisting tropical trees like dancers, laying flat the grass? Or of low houses in strong sunlight, white as if they were built of chalk? Should she tell them of the bazaars of Kowloon, of coral atolls in a turquoise sea, of the sea-cliffs of Formosa, or of eastern gardens kept as carefully as ladies' elaborate hair? What could she say in the late Vermont afternoon, where loneliness was something that she breathed with air, where the quiet was more quiet because of the last twitterings of a bird and the insistent

whirr of a mower working in a distant field — what could she say here of the Pacific that would not make her voice go up and that they would care to hear?

The robin had flown to the grass, and suddenly Kate leaped up and ran toward it with a shout. She watched it fly to the wall along the road, and when she came back toward the steps, she began to sing. She had the thin, piping voice of a five-year-old, and the song was one she had learned at play-school in the spring, and which she sang whenever she felt like singing. It began:

‘I have a bonnet trimmed with blue.  
Do you wear it? Yes, I do.  
I will wear it when I can —’

But Tom broke in. He said, as if by prearrangement, ‘We’re going to the hideout,’ and they immediately started off together.

‘No,’ Julia cried, and half arose. ‘You’ve just been cleaned up. Don’t go!’ But they did not turn round, and in the dimming, illusory light they suddenly seemed very far away from her, small and remote on the wide lawn, a white shirt and a pink dress, bright objects far beyond her reach or the power of her voice, and she let them go. ‘Don’t get dirty,’ she called without conviction.

And when they had vanished in the barn, she sank down on the step and felt a sharp bitterness toward them. Children, she said to herself, have an infinite capacity for detachment. They are like cats, they do not really *care*, and to pretend otherwise is sentimentality.

Their voices rose suddenly from the barn — a high shriek from Kate and then the awful sound of Tom’s imitation of machine-gune fire: *aa — aa — aa — aa — aa — aa*. Their endless, aimless, valueless war games! If Dick were here, he would have organized some activity for them, been in it himself or interested them in it so intensely that he would

not have had to be. But Julia lacked some necessary knack with them. Each day she tortured her brain for something constructive to occupy them for more than a moment, and everything she thought of failed. Their gardens were a tangle of weeds; in the shed off the kitchen hung the pieces of plywood she had given them for butterfly and insect collections, and on Kate's there was a single maimed cricket, on Tom's, one dragon fly and the wing of a crow; their scrap-books were a mess of dried paste and a few pictures put in crookedly; Dick's workbench in the garage, which Julia had encouraged Tom to use, was piled with jumbled tools and scraps of wood, and nothing but one misshapen thing that he called an airplane had come of that. What was it — about them, about her?

She glanced down into the deep, dark valleys, and she gasped a little. If she could only manage this time of day without falling into her mood of nervous resentment against nothing, and hopelessness! She called the children in the middle of the afternoon and got them cleaned up early, so that they could all be together at this time; but like today, she was unable to hold them, and they almost always left her again. On rainy days it was better. They had to stay indoors, she lit a fire, they listened to her while she read, and it was cheery. But to wish for rain at Faraway — Dick would slap her if he knew. Still — on sunny days they disappeared. She would see them wandering off through a field, and then, much later, mysteriously reappear, without explanations. Or they would be in the barn for hours at a time, either making their terrible mock-battle racket, or being absolutely quiet. Sometimes she came upon them suddenly and found them whispering together, and she could not repress the suspicion, admittedly foolish, that they were almost conspiratorial. Once, when she asked them what they were whispering about, Tom looked at her shrewdly and, in an elaborately offhand way, said, 'Oh, we got a secret weapon.'

Kate was singing again, behind the barn, and the sound of her small voice made Julia shiver.

‘I will wear it when I can,  
Going to the ball with my young man. . . .’

Some secret quality in Kate’s voice disturbed Julia, the remoteness, or perhaps only her self-contained air when she sang, as if she felt that there was no one else in the world, that her song was a miracle by which she transcended all wants.

Mrs. Jacobs, the farmer’s wife, for whom Julia had been waiting, was coming up the road at last. Almost eagerly Julia watched her faded blue dress appear and disappear between the trees, and she stood up to greet her when she got to the gate.

‘The eggs,’ Mrs. Jacobs said, ‘and the fowl.’ She handed Julia the paper box of eggs and the dressed chicken wrapped in newspaper which had become sodden.

‘Sit down for a minute, won’t you?’ Julia was glad to see her and her voice was warm with welcome.

Mrs. Jacobs was a spare woman of fifty or sixty, with long, taut tendons showing in her brown neck, and thin brown hair pulled tight over her skull. She looked tired and sat down on the steps with a sigh. She took off her gold-rimmed spectacles and rubbed the steam off them with the edge of her skirt.

‘What do you hear from the Doctor?’ she asked.

‘I haven’t heard anything for more than a month,’ Julia said.

‘It’s not the same up here without him, I guess,’ Mrs. Jacobs said.

Julia did not reply at once. At last she said, ‘I think it was a mistake to come at all this summer. Everything’s so difficult — the marketing . . . And the children and I get lonely!’

Mrs. Jacobs put her glasses on and looked at her. 'You're used to people and need them,' she said with a curious lack of sympathy.

'Especially since the Richards didn't come up,' Julia continued. 'We used to go over there all the time, or they came here. And the Harrises, too. That leaves only the Jacksons, of our friends, and they live on the other side of the village.'

'Came through the Harris place. There's a dead fox in their swimming pool.'

'Our shutters need painting,' Julia said.

'Maybe you shouldn't have come,' Mrs. Jacobs said.

'I wouldn't have, but I wanted to get the children away from talk of war. That's all they hear in the city. Even at school. Everywhere — war, war, war! And after all, that isn't normal. I can't bear to think of them growing up to believe that war is the normal thing in life.' Julia talked rapidly, as if she wanted to say a great deal before Mrs. Jacobs stood up again to leave.

'Isn't it?'

'*War?*'

'You fight weeds, or you fight to make money, or you fight to make a place in the world or to keep the one you've got.'

'But killing — I mean killing. That's not normal. And breaking up homes, and lives.'

'It's harder for a woman like you, I guess,' Mrs. Jacobs said.

'The war?'

'Your husband being away.'

'What kind of woman am I?' Julia heard herself laugh nervously.

Mrs. Jacobs looked at her squarely. 'I used to see the Doctor shake out your dustmop.'

Julia laughed again, easily. 'That's nothing,' she said. 'I'm clumsy with my hands. See this burn? Pure clumsiness. I never could get the dust out of a mop. He has some

knack with his wrists, so he could shake it quickly and ——’

‘The Doctor *does* for you. And the way you live, somebody always does for you.’

‘Oh, come now, Mrs. Jacobs. We’re not wealthy. I’ve had two children. I manage a big house in ——’

‘Wash ready?’ Mrs. Jacobs asked abruptly, and stood up with a heavy sigh of finality.

‘Don’t go!’

‘Got supper to get.’

Julia opened the door and pulled out a white laundry bag, stuffed full, and Mrs. Jacobs swung it over her shoulder. ‘Tuesday if it don’t rain,’ she said, and started off down the path. Once more Julia watched the blue dress flash between the trees, and, leaning slackly against the frame of the screen door, she continued to stare down the road long after Mrs. Jacobs had disappeared, until the dark trees blurred in her vision. A yell from the barn startled her.

The children came streaking across the lawn, both of them covered with dirt. Tom was howling. He danced up and down before Julia, flapping one hand and shouting, ‘My hand! My hand!’

‘Rusty nail,’ Kate said wisely.

Tom stopped his noise and clutched the wrist of the injured hand. ‘It wasn’t rusty.’

‘Let me see!’ Julia commanded. She had been trying vainly to take hold of Tom’s hand.

‘Don’t squeeze!’ he yelled.

‘Don’t you be a baby,’ she said sternly. She turned the hand up and looked at the scratch on the palm. It was rather deep and it was not bleeding much — the kind of wound which easily became infected.

‘It wasn’t rusty, honest,’ Tom protested.

‘Yes, it was,’ Kate said.

Tom looked at his mother apprehensively. ‘Do I need iodine?’

'Let's not have another scene about iodine. All cuts need iodine, whether the nail is rusty or not. Your father is a doctor. You know all about it. Come in, Tom.'

He was pulling away from her in terror. 'It burns!' he wailed.

Julia got a tighter grip on his wrist and tugged him close to her. 'Listen, Tom,' she said severely, 'you're seven years old. The last time you scratched yourself, I didn't force you to put iodine on it. And your foot got infected. You had to soak it in epsom salts for five days. Do you remember? The water has to be very hot. A little stinging now — and it's nothing at all — it's better than an infection later. And you *must* get over this foolish fear. It gets worse and worse. Come along.'

He began to struggle with her. He braced his feet against the steps and pulled away from her. His face, under the streaks of dirt, was white and desperate. Julia's lips tightened with resolution. She got behind him and put her hands under his arms and marched him into the house. '*Don't* struggle!' she cried.

'No! No! No!' he begged, and his legs kicked out ahead of him.

'I've got you,' she cried. 'Don't fight! I've *got* you!'

Kate followed them. She had been grinning when they first appeared from the barn, but now she looked troubled.

Julia felt for a moment that she would not be able to handle Tom, and it was only with what seemed to be a supreme demand upon her strength that she got him through the house to the small washroom off the kitchen. There she made him sit down on a chair. Then, as she turned to open the medicine chest, he tried to dart past her.

But now she felt that the situation was hers. 'Very well,' she said curtly. She took him by the arms and, in spite of his struggles, manoeuvred him into the corner near the medicine chest. Then she leaned against him and held him there with

her weight while she opened the chest, found the iodine, and loosened the cap. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her hair had fallen about her face, there was sweat on her forehead, and a streak of blood across her cheek from Tom's scratch made her look savage. She was panting. As she took the stopper from the bottle, she saw Kate in the doorway, her dirty face frightened, her eyes wide and staring.

'Go away, Kate,' Julia said as calmly as she could, but Kate did not stir.

Tom, who had momentarily ceased his struggling and was sobbing quietly, now began to twist and turn and to yell again. His face was bright red as he arched his back and strained to free himself.

'Stop it!' Julia shouted angrily. 'Listen, you baby,' she cried, 'you're always wanting to hear about war. All right, I'll tell you. Don't you know what war is? Men get *killed*! They lose their arms and legs, they get blown to pieces. That may have happened to your father, or can any day! And you're afraid of a little iodine!'

He was staring at her frantically, his eyes wild, but for the first time he was wholly quiet. She pulled his hand roughly to her, lifted the stopper from the bottle, and applied it. Tom gave a great shriek and freed his hand. He began to blow on it furiously.

Julia pushed her hair out of her eyes. She put the iodine away. Kate watched her solemnly, and then suddenly turned round and went into the kitchen and out through the back door. Outside she began to sing.

Julia walked into the kitchen and sank down on a chair beside an open window. She put her elbow on the sill and rested her head on her hand. Tom was sobbing quietly in the washroom, still huddled in the corner. Dimly, she heard him groan, 'Oh, you nut-head! You *nut-head*!'

She remembered something Dick had told her once about the threshold of pain in children, and how it varied from per-

son to person, and that Tom was apparently even more sensitive to pain than most children. She clenched her hands in repentance. Nothing had been gained, nothing, and her head sank in the knowledge of a loss, instead.

When she lifted her head and looked out of the window, she saw Kate wandering into the meadow which sloped up, behind the house, to the top of the hill and down to a wood on the other side. Only her shoulders and her brown hair were visible above the tall grass, but the thin song she sang came clearly back on the deadened evening air:

‘My young man has gone to sea;  
When he comes back, he’ll play with me.  
Tip to the heel and tip to the toe,  
That’s the way the polka goes.

I have a bonnet trimmed with blue . . .’

Julia started to get up. The sun was down now and the meadow was gray with twilight. She would have to bring the child back. But suddenly she was too weak to move, and she sagged down into the chair and put her head on the window sill and began to cry.

Strength was illusory. Everything was illusory, and above all now her past, which seemed suddenly as if she had never lived it or possessed it.

Tom came out of the washroom and looked at her coldly for a moment. Then, tiptoeing across the kitchen, he too went outside, and once out, he began to run.

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## *The End of the Beginning*

FRASER knew that his wife was still awake, but she would not say good-bye. It was snowing outside, a damp, heavy March snowfall that had already muffled the city and closed it in upon itself, and a queer white light that came in through the slats of the blinds showed him her face quite clearly. He stood beside her bed and watched her eyelids, sure that he could see them flicker, and he listened to her breathing, which was too quick for the breath of sleep. Then he was suddenly aware of his own breath, fast and shallow, coming through his open mouth, and he could feel his heart beating. He went to the windows and closed the blinds quietly, and as he walked past his wife's bed he stopped and said, 'Good-bye, dear,' softly, and then went out of the room and across the hall into his study, where he kept his clothes. It was ten-thirty, time for him to leave.

He took his shabby tweed overcoat and his battered hat out of his closet, put them on, picked up his overnight bag, snapped off the lamp on his desk, and went into the hall. He opened the door of Tim's room and saw that he was covered to his chin and sleeping soundly. Then he started down the hall toward the living room, but stopped, turned round, and went back and looked into Hal's room, too.

In the living room, Fraser put the screen in front of the fireplace, even though little was left there but ash, and switched out the lights. In the front hall he put on his rub-

bers. He opened the door into the foyer, checked the lock, and, just before going out, put his hand into his inner coat pocket to be sure he had his wallet, and then into his pants pocket to be sure he had his keys. When he got outside, he looked up at the apartment windows and saw that they were all black.

The snow had been falling for four or five hours, and as Fraser started his walk to the Square, where he could take the subway to South Station, the soft, delightful hush over everything made him suddenly remember what it was like to be a boy in a snowstorm in a small town, and immediately he felt much better than he had since his quarrel with his wife an hour before. He hoped he would have time enough in New York to find some attractive present for her — she had long wanted some ear clips to wear with a particular pin — and then he gave his mind to the lecture he was to deliver at Princeton the next afternoon, and forgot about the snow as he shuffled through it, and about his wife.

He was to talk on 'The Prospects of a Liberal Peace,' a subject which would involve him in a certain amount of fancy footwork if he was to please all the elements in his audience. And Fraser was determined to please. If the lecture was successful, he would almost certainly be offered the vacant chair in Political Economy. He was uncomfortably aware that it was already March; his present appointment, since he had failed to get a permanent one, ended in June.

On the subway platform he bought a *Record* and glanced at the front of it. There were big war headlines, then a large picture of a pretty girl and under that, the beginning of a story about her divorce. It brought the quarrel back to his mind. A train banged into the station and as Fraser got on it, he swore softly with irritation and shame.

His wife had said, in perfectly good faith, he knew now, 'Why don't you call Harold in New York? He's a Princeton man, and I think he sometimes does work for the trustees.'

'Harold? What does he know about political economy? Harold is a corporation lawyer.'

She hesitated. 'I mean, he has influence there. He could help you.'

'Harold help me?'

'Why not? He'd be glad to. He's perfectly friendly.'

They were in Fraser's study. He was packing his bag. He had his back to her, and he could see his hands trembling. He made himself put his pajamas and a shirt into the bag before he answered, and he folded a tie meticulously and laid it on top of the shirt. Then he said, 'Isn't he a wonderful fellow! So magnanimous. My God — Harold! Harold! Harold!' He faced her in a sudden fury of distress. 'Can't we ever get rid of him?'

She closed her eyes. 'Are we on that again? I'm sorry I brought it up.'

'You just can't forget him, can you, after all those years with him?'

'Four years, to be exact. I don't think of him for days at a time, as you perfectly well know. But of course I can't *forget* him. Why should I? For one thing, Hal happens to be his son.'

Fraser stared at her. Then, softly, he said, 'Yes, there's that. And it reminds me of something I've wanted to point out. You get a hundred and fifty a month for Hal's support. He'll always be able to go to the best schools, as he's doing now. Next year Tim starts school, and on the kind of money I've earned so far, he *isn't* going to be able to. Have you thought of that?'

'Yes, I have,' she said quietly. 'It isn't very important. Tim isn't going to suffer. Would you rather have Hal have less?' Then suddenly she was angry, her face white and her eyes blazing at him. 'What are you *at* me for? What have I done?'

'You haven't done anything,' Fraser said. 'I'd only like to know sometime how much you really regret.'

She stood up. 'You know, you're crazy. I don't regret anything. You make this up!' He could see her lower lip trembling, as it always did before she began to cry. She went to the door and turned round, and she was crying. 'If there had been no Jews in Germany, Hitler would have found somebody else. You used to tell me that. This is the same thing.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I don't know what's *under* your quarrels. All I know is that if you didn't have Harold to quarrel about, you'd find something else. You like it that way. What do you want of me, anyway?'

She did not wait for an answer. She went across the hall quickly, into their bedroom, and closed the door. He stood still and stared at the closed white door, as he stared now at the gray tunnel walls flickering past the windows. Then the walls changed to gleaming white tiles, and the train stopped. Fraser read the signs — 'South Station Under.' He had twisted the tabloid into shreds without opening it.

When Fraser came into the station, he saw by the big round clock over the first newsstand that it was just eleven. His train did not leave until twelve-thirty, but he had had to come in early to pick up his reservation. He went into the waiting room to one of the Pullman windows and gave his name to the man behind the grill, and when he had his ticket, he walked out of the waiting room and stared at the clock again. It was ten minutes after eleven.

He had a deep and uncomfortable feeling of self-disgust, and decided that what he wanted was a drink. He went outside and plowed through the thick snow to a near-by hotel with a bar, where he had been before. Brassy music from the dining room at the right of the small lobby greeted him as he entered. He turned left and walked past groups of commercial travelers, service men, and a few gaudy women toward the bar. At the entrance he gave his hat and coat and bag to the check girl, and hesitated a moment to see where

she would put his bag, which contained his lecture. Then he went into the dimly lit room.

There was only one empty stool at the circular bar, and that was between two men who seemed to be talking together. Fraser paused tentatively behind them — one was a sailor, the other a portly civilian of about forty — but their conversation had broken off, and when they made no effort to move together, Fraser climbed up on the stool. He ordered bourbon and water, and when it was put down in front of him, he paid for it.

'Four dollars a night for a room in a flophouse. With bugs!' the sailor said vehemently, leaning forward to address the other man.

Fraser leaned back so that the two could see each other. The civilian was not as respectable as he had at first appeared. His shirt collar was gray, and there was a day's growth of stubble on his loose and somewhat blubbery face. His eyes were small and reddened and he looked at the sailor with an odd intensity.

'My ship docked yesterday morning. First thing I did was stop in a place to get a wallet,' the sailor said, prodding his fingers into the pocket of his blouse and bringing out a small black billfold. 'Two-fifty. And look.' He opened it and held it across Fraser to show the man that it had already cracked at the folds. 'Paper.'

Fraser took up his glass and studiously looked into it. The conversation was making him uncomfortable.

'It's like I tell you,' the heavy man said.

'I go into a joint for breakfast. A doughnut and a couple of eggs and coffee. Six bits.'

'They're after you boys. They'll roll you every time.'

'Look at this bar. You wouldn't know a lot o' guys had bled and died for 'em, would you? What a town like this needs is a couple of bombs.'

The civilian flung out his hand, plump and hairless, in a

gesture of disgust. 'This town's the same as all of them. I travel a lot, and I see this country. It's the same all over. The service man's the sucker, and the civilian's making the hay. What's in it for you? You're giving the best years of your life for them, and maybe your life, and they'll gyp you every time you move. But what do you expect with this government?'

Fraser decided to get away. His drink was only half finished, and he didn't want to seem obvious about leaving, but he was afraid that if he stayed, he would be drawn into the conversation. He didn't want to be.

The sailor's face had flushed. He said, 'We'll show 'em yet, don't worry.'

'Yeah? How?' the civilian demanded aggressively.

'How? Wait'll we're out.'

'Wait'll you're out — in the breadlines.'

'None of that stuff. Wait'll there ain't no S.P.'s around.'

'Then what?' the civilian urged.

'We're going to take over this country, and we're going to run it the way *we* like it. For us, see?'

'Bud, now you're talking. There're a lot of people you got to fix up. I hope you don't forget it.'

'We won't forget it. We're learnin' plenty.'

'Don't you forget it, bud, don't you ——'

Fraser put down his half-emptied glass, slipped off the stool, and walked quickly out of the bar. He gave the girl at the coat rack his check and put a quarter down on her salver. She put his hat and bag on her table, and came round to the side of it to help him with his coat. He turned to get into it, and found himself confronted by the sailor and the plump civilian. They were standing very close to him, both with their heads thrust forward, and he took a quick surprised half step back.

'So you don't like us,' the civilian said.

Fraser got his arms into the sleeves of his overcoat and, as

casually as possible, asked, 'What do you mean?' His voice sounded too high.

'I mean so you don't like us.'

Fraser cleared his throat nervously. 'I didn't say anything to you.'

'You left your drink.'

'I've got a train to catch.' He put on his hat and picked up his bag.

'No you don't, Jack,' the sailor said, and, reaching out a big hand, seized the front of Fraser's coat at his chest. 'If you don't like what we were sayin', we thought maybe you'd like to step outside and tell us why.'

Fraser heard the girl moving behind him. She had shoved aside the little table, and now she stepped between him and the sailor and pulled his hand off Fraser's coat. 'You go have a drink,' she said sweetly to the sailor.

'The gentleman has a little explaining to do,' the civilian said with nasty emphasis.

With her free arm, the girl pushed Fraser back. He glanced behind him and saw that she had cleared a space on the coat rack, and that behind it was a door. He ducked through the space, turned the knob, opened the door, and found himself outside. It seemed miraculous. Without waiting, he started to run across the street. The thick snow made running difficult, and when he got to the sidewalk beside the station, his heart was pounding and he was trembling all over. He walked swiftly to the first entrance he came to, and when he got inside he stopped and leaned against the wall. He felt his pocket to be sure that he still had his wallet.

As his fright drained away, and the episode began to seem a little foolish, he remembered his wife and the way he had left her. At the end of the wide corridor in which he stood were three telephone booths. He decided that he could not bring himself to get on his train without her forgiveness.

The telephone rang for a long time before she answered,

and when she did, he did not say what he had meant to say, but asked, 'Are you all right?'

'I'm all right,' she said. 'Are you?'

He laughed shortly. 'Yes. Sure.'

'You woke me.'

'I'm sorry. I couldn't leave without asking you to forgive me.'

'Of course,' she said.

'I'm sorry. I honestly am. I was very foolish.'

'It's all right.'

'I don't know why I go off the deep end that way.'

'It's all right.'

'I won't, again.'

'Make a good speech, won't you?'

'Good-bye, dear.'

'Good-bye.'

He smiled to himself as he put back the receiver, bent to pick up his bag, and turned to open the door of the booth. But the smile changed slowly to a foolish grimace when he saw the two men waiting for him in the corridor. They stood by the opposite wall, directly in line with the phone booth. The sailor's arms were folded over his pea jacket and he stood with his feet apart. The civilian's hands were thrust into the pockets of his sagging gray coat, and his little eyes peered straight at Fraser from under the snapped brim of his hat.

Automatically, Fraser shoved his foot against the fold in the door so that it couldn't be opened. He kept it there as he reached in his pocket, turned to the telephone again, took up the receiver, and pretended to drop a nickel in the box. Then he dialled a number. His hand was shaking, and he could feel the moisture of his palm against the receiver. Under his hatband, points of perspiration were forming, tickling his forehead. He decided that he would have to wait where he was until someone came through whom he could ask for help.

With his eyes on the corridor, but studiously off the two men, he moved his lips. At first he could bring out no sounds, and when he did begin to talk, the disjointed phrases which came from his mouth were fragments from the lecture he had so carefully prepared for the next day. He could think of nothing else. '... in a world miraculously diminished by new systems of communications and of transportation ...' He paused. No one went by. '... the superb achievement of technology and the dire threat it contains ...' He paused again, and with dismay saw an old man lumber drunkenly and obliviously toward the entrance. He waited as long as he could before he spoke again, and as he waited, two girls in shabby fur jackets went by, glancing at the men, as Fraser then did, too; their eyes were fixed upon him. '... with our native proclivity to an isolation more arrogant than it is indolent ...' '... the brutal force of the economically dispossessed which we cannot expect again to palliate with ...' He stopped. He could not go on. Sweat was streaming down his face, and he was suddenly limp with terror. He could not stay there any longer, trapped like some animal, helplessly. He would pull himself together now, open the door, and run for it.

He could not believe his eyes when he saw a policeman slowly walk by toward the concourse, and at first he only gaped, until the officer was almost too far past to help him. Then abruptly he let the receiver bang down against the wall of the booth, seized his bag, violently pulled open the door, and called, 'Officer! Officer!' For all his vocal effort, his voice was not loud, but was somehow strangled by his breath.

The policeman stopped and turned round.

'What time is it, please?' Fraser panted as he reached him.

The officer pointed toward the big clock over the newsstand as they came into the concourse. 'About twelve.'

'I thought I was late.' Gratefully, Fraser saw that here there were plenty of people.

'You been running?'

'Yes.'

They walked along together toward the train gates.

'It's a nasty night, isn't it?' Fraser said.

'Sure is.'

'These March blizzards . . . ' He was still breathing heavily, and the policeman glanced at him with curiosity for the first time. Fraser laughed uncertainly. 'Well, my gate's over there. Good night.'

'Good night.'

Without glancing back, Fraser walked swiftly to Gate Twelve, where two conductors were sitting on high stools at a narrow table. Fraser faced the desk and looked over the heads of the men. No one was following him. He put his tickets on the desk and kept his eyes on the people moving about in the station.

'Car five hundred and ten, upper twelve,' one of the conductors said.

'Thank you.' He took his stub and passed through the gate.

Immediately he realized that those men would not have dared to attack him back there at the telephone booth; it was too public a spot. They had followed him simply to frighten him and amuse themselves. Then he was absolutely overwhelmed with shame. It was like something horribly physical, like a dreadful disease of his skin which had infected every inch of him, every pore; but even then, as he was overcome by the sensation of a scrofulous disgrace so strong that he nearly groveled under its force, his mind leaped to something else. Walking uncertainly along the train to his car, it occurred to him with shattering conviction that sometime when he went away from home like this, on an overnight trip, or perhaps merely to a class for an hour, he would come back to find that the apartment was empty and that she had gone. He would shout, and he would get no answer at all.



## 28

### *An Aftermath*

**M**Y NAME IS WILLIAM B. BROWNE III. I am thirty-five years old, decently educated, and successful in work which I do not exactly despise but which leaves me with an increasing sense of failure in the midst of accomplishment. I should state at once that I am a man of many discontents, and that I have not expected anyone but Mary, my wife, to view my problems with perfect seriousness. My discontents are probably chronic, and if in other professional circumstances they should disappear, I would no doubt develop a set of new ones. Yet, for myself, in the interior debate, I cannot hold to irony. Nor can I dismiss my state of mind with a shrug, as I am prepared to have others dismiss it. Nor can I escape it simply by attributing it to modern history.

All this is merely to say that although I am not at all suited to advise other men of unsettled mind, I was expected to perform that function for Jeff Grandison. Betty Grandison's invitation had made this clear. She did not want to give a week-end party. She was not really equipped to entertain people in the place where she and Jeff and their child had spent the summer. But summer had slipped into autumn, and they were still there, and she had arranged the week-end at last because Jeff had to be stirred up. I had been asked because I am a lawyer, which Jeff had planned to be, and because his father had been a senior partner in my firm before his death and because it had always been understood that

when Jeff finished law school, there would be a place in the firm for him. The war had interrupted Jeff's career. At the end of his first year at law school, he was commissioned in the Navy, and now that he had been discharged, he showed no inclination to return. I was to help persuade him. The other man Betty had chosen was a young scientist friend of theirs, one of those brilliant young men whom the war had really created and who now enjoy such abnormal glamour in the public eye. I suppose that Betty hoped that either his great self-confidence or his conspicuous success or both together would stimulate Jeff to efforts of his own.

Mary and I did not know either the scientist or the girl he was bringing with him, and we had no reason to think that they were the rather noisy couple who sat a few seats away from us on the train that took us to the shore. All the way these two laughed uproariously over some childish game they were playing with their fingers. Mary and I did not talk much. We sat with our arms linked, our shoulders pressed together, thinking of nothing, but close. We have long taken each other for granted, and we have been, I suppose, dependent on each other in the way that only childless people are if they depend on each other at all.

When we got off the train, Betty Grandison and a man in Navy grays whom we first took to be Jeff were waiting for us. Betty waved, and as we came closer we saw that the man with her was a stranger.

'This is Mac,' Betty said. 'Lieutenant McLaughlin.' He was a man in his late twenties, with a dark, preoccupied face and a somber air, but his voice was friendly and seemed slightly Southern.

'We thought you were Jeff,' Mary said. 'We thought Jeff was back in uniform.'

'Where is Jeff?' I asked.

'Jeff is at home,' Betty said. 'He doesn't stir any more

unless he has to.' She was looking about her, up and down the length of the train as she talked, and then she waved. 'There they are,' she said.

They were the noisy people. The girl was very handsome, thin and dark, with glossy black hair, a high color, and beautiful teeth. She was wearing well-tailored black slacks, and she looked as though she had been living in the country, not as though she had just come down from the city. She was waving one arm and shouting, 'Hi, you-all.' She wore sandals so that she would not tower over her man, but the man did not seem to be disturbed by her height. He was short and slightly rotund, and he carried himself with an easy, bouncing jauntiness which struck me as comic until I discovered his arrogance. He wore no tie, and as he came toward us the wind blew his unbuttoned, wrinkled seersucker coat behind him, and we could hear his moccasins flap along the platform. Clearly, he was without any interest in the impression he conveyed.

'Hello!' Betty said warmly. 'Lynn Barker and Pat Dorius. Meet Mary and Bill Browne, and Mac McLaughlin. Mac was in Africa and Sicily with Jeff, and now he's stationed near here.'

'Hello, hello, hello,' said Lynn Barker brightly to each of us as she performed three little motions which were to suggest curtsies.

'Hi,' said Pat Dorius, and he shook hands laconically with McLaughlin and me.

Lynn Barker was hardly twenty, and Pat Dorius could not have been more than twenty-five, and Mary and I now exchanged a discomforted glance which commented both on our age and our dress. We would be, it was clear, the oldest people at the Grandisons, and objectionable as both of us already found Dorius and his girl, we were aware that they rather than we had accurately estimated the week-end. It was hot and they looked comfortable. Mary was wearing a

black city dress with satin insets and a new fall satin hat and some heavy silver jewelry and open-toed shoes with spike heels. I was wearing the dark-blue suit I had worn to work that morning and a detachable collar on a Finchley shirt. We had looked good to each other when we met in the station after lunch, but now Mary looked overdressed, and I felt stuffy and uncomfortable as I stood listening to Pat Dorius tell how he and Lynn had seen us on the train but had not thought that *we* were the other Grandison guests! Does it all seem rather trivial? It would be, perhaps, if it were not that Mary and I have a certain genius for never doing things quite right.

'Well, we're all here,' said Betty, holding down the skirt of her gingham dirndl as the hot wind suddenly blew at it. 'Let's go.' We piled the luggage in the back of her car and got in. Mary was squeezed between Betty and me in the front seat, and when the car started she took off her hat and held it in her lap.

'How long are you staying on here, Betty?' Mary asked.

'Ask Jeff. I honestly don't know. I wish I did. It's comfortable enough in a ramshackle way, but I hate loose ends, and ever since Jeff got out of the Navy, we've had only loose ends. He won't make up his mind to go back to law school. Now he thinks he wants to do something else entirely. "But what?" I ask him, and he doesn't seem to know what, and he doesn't do anything.'

It was a long speech for Betty, and a distraught one. We knew her as a quiet girl, with an unusual serenity in manner and a calm brevity in speech. I leaned forward to speak to her, and she looked harried and nearly gaunt. The wind lifted her loose blond hair away from her cheeks, and her pretty face, in spite of the healthy tan, was tired. She looked older than Mary, whose round white face was, as usual, placid. I said, 'We must not urge him to go on with law if he doesn't want to. That was my mistake. I let my father

urge me. I wanted to be a journalist. A liberal journalist. We have yet to develop a really enlightened political analysis of current events in this country.' For the first time I felt that it was vaguely sickening to hear myself say that, I had heard myself say it so often before.

'Bill's never been happy in law,' Mary said, 'but it's too late now to change.' It was a contented remark which, like mine, had been made too often, and I felt a moment's wild irritation with Mary for assuming so complacently that it was indeed too late now.

'Bill,' Betty said earnestly, 'work on Jeff, please, won't you?' The anxiety in her plea brought my mind abruptly back to her problem.

We were in the country now. It was October, and it was strange to see the woods so gaudy when the temperature was like July. Dead leaves blew down from the trees, and every now and then the speed of the open car whipped a spray of leaves, like small birds, up over our heads. The ocean flashed darkly blue between the trees, and the beaches looked white and hot.

Betty turned on to a side road and then, lowering her voice, she said, 'There's one other thing. Let the bedroom situation ride.'

'What do you mean?' Mary asked.

'Well, Lynn and Pat. Everyone knows they're sleeping together — he's waiting for a divorce from someone he married in college — but I don't know if they know that everyone knows. Let it take care of itself. I think I have it fixed.' The car was slowing down and she added, 'Here we are.'

We all looked at the modest bungalow with its brown, shingled sides, and as the car turned into the drive, we all saw a boy in the front yard throw a croquet mallet at a small black and white dog. The mallet caught the dog smartly on the rump and sent him yipping shrilly in pain and terror round the farther side of the house.

Pat half stood up in the back seat. 'Why, that dirty ——', 'Shh!' Betty said.

The boy was nineteen or twenty and had on a dark-blue shirt which hung out over his trousers. A girl, obviously pregnant, with long, yellow, fuzzily permanented hair and a big pompadour, stood leaning indifferently against the porch.

Betty drove slowly to the barn behind the house. 'Don't you know who that is? Didn't I write you about him?'

'That dirty ——' Pat started to say again.

'He's Joe Henry,' Betty said, 'the war hero.'

'My God!' I exclaimed.

'What a nasty temper,' said Mary.

'But he looks like a *caddy*!' shrieked Lynn Barker, and as we got out of the car, she said, 'And the white trash live in the barn.' We laughed politely.

Jeff was waiting for us. He was slouched down in a big wicker chair and did not get up when we came in. He was wearing dungarees, but he had no shirt on and his feet were bare. His chest looked caved in and his face was white and empty. 'Greetings,' he said amiably.

Everyone exclaimed about the barn. The room was enormous, with windows at the back and large panes set into the original sliding doors at the front. Three small bedrooms were partitioned off along one side of the room, and a bedroom, a bath, and the kitchen off the other. The floor of the loft had been removed, and the beamed interior of the tall roof was completely exposed except for one side, where the wall that shut off the three bedrooms continued up. Rough stairs near the back of the room led to a landing and a door in that wall. Through the back windows, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, the ocean flashed darkly between sable tree trunks.

'Sit down,' Jeff said. 'We're here for the winter. All we do is light that stove. . . .' He turned his head just enough to indicate a round, airtight stove near the windows.

'We are not here for the winter, and will you please put a shirt on?' Betty said.

'You look peaked, kid,' Lynn Barker said. 'Where's that old Navy brawn?'

'I'm okay,' Jeff said. 'Sit down or I'll have to get up.'

'No,' said Betty. 'Let's get the room situation fixed up first. Now Mac is in there, and we're in there, and Betty Jane ——'

'Where is Betty Jane?' Mary asked, and the eagerness in her voice reminded me that when people tell us occasionally that we really ought to have children, my first impulse is always to tell them that we have not tried not to have them. But I usually say, instead, that it is my observation that children heighten rather than solve the problems of their parents.

'Betty Jane's in the bathroom,' Jeff said.

Betty went on. 'That leaves the room next to the bathroom on this floor, and upstairs are two rooms. Now we can put Betty Jane in with us, but I thought if Lynn and Pat would use the two rooms upstairs, then the Brownes ——'

'That's fine,' Pat said.

'Okie-dokie,' said Lynn.

'Can I telephone?' Mac asked Jeff.

'Stop asking,' Jeff replied.

We picked up our luggage and started toward our rooms, and then Jeff called out, 'Don't mind Mac, he telephones all the time. He keeps trying to get his wife to come live with him.'

'Put your shirt on,' Betty said, and when he did not stir, she went into their bedroom and came out with a sweat shirt and a pair of sneakers. She threw them at him and they landed in his lap.

Mac was clicking impatiently at the telephone. He began to say, 'Hello! Hello! Hey, hello!'

We changed our clothes. I got into flannels and a tennis shirt, and Mary put on a tweed skirt and a green linen blouse and some espadrilles. As I was about to open the door, she said, 'I still don't feel just right,' and it was true that she did not look just right, that now she looked very short. Mary needs high heels.

Jeff must have heard her through the thin walls. 'You always look good, Mary,' he said. He had put on the sweat shirt and the sneakers, but he was still in the wicker chair. 'How about some drinks, Betty?'

'I'm feeding Betty Jane,' she called from the kitchen. 'Are you crippled?'

'I'm crippled,' he answered pleasantly, and when he did not stir, I said, 'Let me.' Jeff raised no objections and I went out to the kitchen. Betty Jane, the Grandison's four-year-old, was sitting on a stool at the kitchen table, and Betty leaned over the table, holding out a spoonful of cereal.

'That's what I mean about Jeff,' she said softly. 'He won't move. Sometimes I think it's some disease he picked up in Africa . . .' She had thrust the spoon into the child's mouth, and now she was scooping a dollop of the cereal off her chin. The child had Betty's wide brown eyes and yellow hair, and a kind of solemn poise which was like Betty, too, when she was less nervous than now.

'There's the liquor,' she said.

'How about daiquiris?'

'There are lemons in the ice chest.'

While I squeezed lemons and loaded a large tray, Betty kept whispering to me. 'Remember, Bill, he's twenty-seven years old. He's been away from law school for almost four years. I don't know — perhaps it's too late already . . . It isn't the uncertainty I mind so much, the insecurity . . . Do you remember his tennis game, the terrific game he used to play, and how he loved it? Well, now . . .' She really did not give me an opportunity to reply.

As I came into the living room with the cocktail tray, the upstairs door opened and Lynn appeared on the landing. She cried, 'Why, Betty, you cute thing, there really are two rooms up here.'

'Of course,' Betty shouted.

Lynn came down and sat on the floor next to Jeff. She had let her hair down and instead of her black jacket, she had put on a tight red wool sweater. 'What's Joe Henry doing here?' she asked Jeff.

'Which hero *is* Joe Henry?' Mary asked.

Mac, looking scrubbed, came out of his room. He had taken off his blouse and he looked younger in his shirt, clean and dark and angry. 'He's the one that lied his way in when he was sixteen,' he said. 'He got the Bronze Star at Normandy, the Silver Star in the Bulge, and finally he jumped up in the middle of a lot of cross-fire somewhere in Germany and laid out twenty-three krauts with his last grenade. He saved a platoon. Then he got the Congressional Medal.'

'And then,' Jeff said sourly, 'he got the works.'

'When he's got his medals on, he can't straighten up,' Mac said.

'Mac, how's the scrap drive?' Jeff laughed.

Jokes of that sort irritate me. I believe that the war, in spite of the utterances of some of our military men and the cynicism of most of our diplomats, was fought on ideological grounds, and that justice triumphed, and a people's will. I said, 'I don't think that's very funny.'

No one paid any attention. 'But why is Joe Henry here?' asked Lynn, and then she glanced up and said, 'Hello, darling,' to Pat, who was just coming out on their landing.

Pat looked exactly as he had before, except that his coat was more wrinkled. 'I had a nap. My God, how will I get in my sleep in the atomic age?' He came jauntily down the stairs and looked at the tray. 'Rum cocktails! Whose idea was that?'

'Mine. There's gin out there if you want it. But I didn't dream up the atomic age. That's your department.'

'Sure,' Pat said happily and went to the kitchen.

'Most people like martinis, Bill,' Mary said.

I looked at her more coldly than her remark justified. 'Nonsense. Anyway, there was more rum. Who wants a daiquiri?'

Mary said, 'Well, I do,' and when no one else spoke, Mac said politely, 'I'll settle for that.'

'Betty? A daiquiri?' I called.

'No, thanks.'

'Jeff?'

'No.'

I poured three daiquiris and handed them around. When Mac had his, he went to the telephone again. 'Anything on that Indianapolis call yet?' we heard him ask, and he slammed down the receiver. He sat by the telephone for a while, away from the rest of us, morosely drinking by the back windows. Outside, mists seemed to be coming up from the sea, and the dark trunks of the trees had turned gray and ghostly, and then the darkening room seemed to fill with a dim mistiness.

Jeff was telling Lynn about Joe Henry. 'So they make this big fuss. First, all the pictures, shaking hands with all the brass from the top down to just under the top. Then a war bond tour, and this kid, who never saw anything but a town called Ground, Arkansas, before the war, sleeps in the Waldorf, in the Ritz in Boston, in the Mayflower, in the Drake. He probably used to put a spare nickel into a juke box in Ground. Now he's dined and wined at Twenty-One and the Mark Hopkins. And always the pictures, and always a couple of celebrities getting their pan in. And then there is this girl, just out of high school in New Brunswick. He danced with her once when he was at Kilmer. That's all. But some wise guy wants him to call a girl long distance and

have his picture taken. So he calls this Daphne. That's all they needed. The papers married them.'

Betty came out of the kitchen with her little girl, but when she heard what Jeff was talking about, she turned her around and said, 'Let's go back and try to finish your milk, dear.'

'And then suddenly it's all over,' Jeff said. 'Just like that. No pictures, no celebrities, no night clubs. Nothing. They're through with him. And he has Daphne.'

Mary broke in. 'But I remember — he had all sorts of jobs offered him, even movie contracts.'

'That's right,' Jeff said, 'and the damned fool picked something that has to do with the Army. Some kind of civilian office job. They took that cottage, for one month, July, and didn't think they'd be here that long. They're still here, getting the well-known run-around.'

Mac came forward from the back of the room. 'He'll get the job. The Army likes to take its time.'

'Sure he'll get it,' Jeff said. 'But he won't be any good when he does.'

'Why?' Pat asked. He was handing out martinis.

'He sits on the porch during the daytime torturing a dog, and he sits in a saloon until it closes at night pouring down cheap whiskey. Partly he does it to get away from Daphne. She's an innocent kid with a church prejudice against liquor. So she nags. She's pregnant, and when Joe isn't there to be nagged, she goes in to town and worries a pediatrician. It's a mess.'

'But fascinating, too. Listen, can't we meet them, Jeff?' Lynn cried.

Betty came out of the kitchen again with Betty Jane. They sat down together and Pat gave Betty a martini. Betty Jane cried, 'Let me get them, let me get them.'

Jeff said, 'Look, Lynn. You don't really want to. I tell you, they're just simple kids.'

'I do want to. I'm fascinated.'

'Go ahead, Jeff,' Pat urged.

Jeff looked at Betty and Betty said, 'I hate to give him anything to drink.'

'That harm's done.'

'All right, Betty Jane. You run and ask Daphne if they would like to come over for a cocktail with us.'

Betty Jane slid down from her mother's lap and ran to the doors. After she had gone out, Jeff said, 'I'm warning you, Lynn. He's just the tough kid of Ground, Arkansas. He's got a bloody temper, and when someone starts pushing, he loses it. He gets into combat and he loses his head, gets blind, swearing mad, and so — so that's a hero.'

'It isn't so simple, there must be more to it than that,' I said as I stood up to make new daiquiris. 'After all, you lose your temper *about* something, and if it's an evil thing, then ——' I stopped and, hamstrung in the familiar way, found myself laughing uneasily. 'I'm telling you?' I asked of Mac and Jeff.

'Tell us, Bill,' Jeff said. 'It's a long time since we heard it.'

Pat Dorius was standing opposite me at the table where the liquor was, and now, as he stirred his pitcher of martinis, he spoke to me in the slow, careful way that a school teacher adopts with an untractable child. Listening to him, I was glad that I was at least a head taller than he. 'You have a certain amount of stuff, and a certain kind,' he said, 'and you throw it. That's all that's to it. And in the next war, because of the kind of stuff, there won't be time for anybody to lose his temper, and there won't be any heroes either.'

I felt my face tighten, and I started to say, 'The next war! What do you think *this* one was about? You scientists ——' when the doors slid open and Betty Jane came in leading Joe Henry and his wife. Betty jumped up and said, 'Hello! I'm glad you could come. Our friends want to meet you, Joe.'

Joe glanced down at the floor and said, 'Evenin', ma'am.' His shirt still hung out over his pants.

'A hero in the flesh!' Lynn Barker cried with her shellacked stupidity. 'Isn't he cute? Look at his hair! Isn't that sweet?'

He had long curly black hair, and a heavy lock of it hung down over his forehead. He brushed it back with his hand and glanced obliquely at Lynn and away again. Through half-closed lids, his black eyes glittered like those of a nervous animal.

'Come in, come in,' said Betty, and urged them into the room. They stood together awkwardly while Betty introduced us. Everyone but Jeff stood up, and only I stepped forward to shake hands with them. Joe Henry's hand was narrow and hard like a young boy's, and his thin, white face had an evasive, hungry look that was reminiscent of literary orphans, yet when I shook his hand, I felt something quite opposite from charity, which would have been crazily irrelevant to him.

'Sit down, Joe, Daphne,' Jeff said. 'What'll you drink?'

'Nothing for me, thank you,' Daphne said primly, patting her exaggerated pompadour.

Joe looked at the two trays in bewilderment before he said, 'I'll take the one with rum in it.'

'Good boy,' I said, and gave him a glass. I had already had three drinks, and I felt a glow of warmth for him and for what he represented, and when I shook his thin, tough hand, I had felt my deference with something like a shock, and it was with genuine humility and no desire to strike a fatuous note that I said now, 'Let's drink to Joe Henry, to everything he did for us.'

He squirmed in his chair and jerked his sharp, white face up to me. 'If you don't mind, just blow that, will you, mister?' he said.

'Why, Joe!' his wife exclaimed, and Lynn Barker shrieked, 'Joe, *darling*, I love you!'

'Look, Bill,' Jeff said, 'you got illusions. We don't want

to spoil them, but they'd last longer in some other room.'

I was watching his small daughter, who had climbed up into his lap and was plucking at his fingers in a half-hearted effort to draw his attention, but Jeff's empty gray eyes were leveled at me, over her head, and he seemed wholly unaware that she was on his knees. I realized that, since our arrival, he had not once recognized her presence, even by a glance, and then, as if the child herself became aware of his indifference at the same moment as I, she slipped off his lap and sidled to the chair next to his. It was Joe's, and in a moment, with a forced casualness that was strange in a child, she crawled up on his lap. His pale face flushed and he looked more uncomfortable than ever, embarrassed with a kind of fierceness.

'Come sit here,' Mary said to the child, and Joe quickly moved his legs so that she slid to her feet.

I could not feel Joe's remark to me as a rebuff. His ill-poised shyness and embarrassment, like his very ordinariness, were the qualities which gave his heroism significance. This mood, and perhaps the dimming light in the room, made it possible to speak wholly from the heart, even in that company, and I said to Jeff, 'I can't understand your bitterness. It's the great regret of my life.'

Jeff began to shake his head slowly from side to side, and Mac said, 'What is?'

'That I wasn't in it.'

'Oh, my God, listen to him,' Jeff groaned softly.

'Why weren't you?' Pat Dorius asked airily. He was sitting on the floor next to Lynn, one arm around her waist and his fingers pressing her thigh.

'I was deferred. I handled the war contracts in my firm.'

'Well?' Pat asked.

'They said they needed me, and I never quite made up my mind to break away.' I said it weakly, and poured myself a drink as I spoke. When I saw that Joe's glass was empty, I

filled that too. Then I turned to Pat and asked challengingly, 'Why weren't *you*?'

'I didn't have to be, and I certainly didn't want to be. I like to live. I made stuff.'

'It's throwing it that hurts, Pat,' Jeff put in.

'Well, making it doesn't,' he said cheerfully. 'That's my life work.'

Joe finished his drink quickly and looked expectantly at me. Daphne put her hand on his arm and said, 'Joe . . .'

I took his glass and Joe said, 'Some brass comes along and chews your face off, that ain't a picnic.'

Jeff leaned back in his chair. 'There was a big shot in Africa and later in Sicily,' he said in a dreamy way, with a voice as gentle as though he were remembering love or his youth, 'there was this big shot — no, I won't tell you who he was, or his rank — he liked to charge around with a motorcycle escort. He'd come roaring into one of those little dusty towns with this big, long, open job that he had requisitioned, and there'd be six motorcycles in front of him and six behind. There was nothing he liked better than to make people jump out of the way.'

The telephone rang and Mac dashed back to it. He listened for a moment, said, 'Well, keep trying,' and then banged down the receiver. He came and stood beside Jeff's chair and ran his hand nervously over his face. 'Nothing yet. She's out again. Where? What the hell!'

'Sit down, Mac. Did I ever tell you how Betty greeted me when I got back? She vomited all night long.'

Betty said, 'Come on, Betty Jane, it's bedtime.'

'That was a compliment to you, Jeff,' Lynn said, 'and I think it's a very sweet story.'

'Come on, Betty Jane.'

They got up and Betty Jane walked to each person and said good night. Then they went to the bathroom.

'This big shot,' Jeff said. 'I keep thinking of the girls he

had — He was an ugly character, but he always had the best-looking army nurse or Wac around in that car with him. Requisitioned.'

'That guy!' Mac said.

'I used to lie in my bunk thinking about his girls. It would almost make me sick, just thinking. He'd give these parties up at his villa, and the nurses would have their hours changed accordingly. The guy did something to me. More than the shooting.'

'The brass!' Joe Henry said with disgust, and he said it with a kind of vehemence that hung momentarily in the room like the echo of gunfire.

'There's a brand of authority,' Jeff went on, 'that robs you of yours.'

I do not know why, out of all the possible moments during and after the war, this moment, the most unlikely, should have made me feel with greatest force my lost opportunity. Nor was it only the sense that I had missed the experience which characterized my generation and would determine the generation after mine, for that I had felt often enough before; but rather, the knowledge which I had not had before, that it was precisely because I had remained at my work when other men had left theirs that made that work seem so shabby and so useless now. Jeff's remarks about authority reminded me only of the obvious fact that I could never expect to hold any. I had elected, through my indecisions, to remain outside the age, a man who need never be heeded.

I cannot convey the force of these discoveries, as I stood in that darkening room beside the tray of my unwanted daiquiris, but it was so great that I turned and went quickly to our bedroom.

Mary followed me at once. 'Bill ——' she whispered.

'That does it,' I said.

'What's the matter?'

I tried to explain as, in part, I had tried before, but now the

stakes were much clearer to me, and as I ended, 'Every uncertainty I've ever had is fixed for good,' they must have become clearer to Mary, too.

She sat down beside me on the bed and put her arms around me and began to cry softly. 'Oh, Bill, nothing's ever *just* right, you know. Nothing. This is only a mood, it's only because ——'

I took some obscure pleasure in saying, 'No, it is not a mood. It's the beginning of what is going to be endless self-reproach.' I felt her shiver beside me. The room seemed dim with sadness. Then she surprised me by abruptly standing up. She went to the bureau and peered into the cloudy mirror. She wiped her eyes and put on lipstick, and without turning, she said sharply, 'You're indulging yourself. Self-reproach! That's nonsense. Pull yourself together. I'm going back.'

I felt so remote from her that, while I was aware that she had never before spoken to me in such a fashion, I did not really wonder what it might mean, and I followed her dully into the living room. There the air was full of a false animation which made it unnecessary for anyone to comment on our withdrawal and return. Lynn Barker cried, 'Can't we all have a drink?'

Everyone's glass was filled again. Mac and Jeff were still exchanging cynical reminiscences about officers, and Joe Henry contributed an occasional violent affirmation. Then it occurred to me that their experience, after all, entailed its limitations, that exactly because they had fought in the war they were least able to estimate it as history. I said, 'You can't judge the meaning of a war by the character of a general, or even by the way a whole Army is managed. You can't convince me that human rights weren't the issue. The war was bigger than it seems to you. Start with Manchuria, or Ethiopia, or the Spanish War. The human issue was always perfectly clear, and if the American people had understood what Spain, for instance, *meant* ——'

I should not have paused, for Pat Dorius seized upon the hesitation. 'You were in one of the brigades?'

'No,' I said, and only that.

But he would not let it go. 'Why not?' he asked.

I had no intention of justifying myself to him, which is what he wished, and I was glad that Joe Henry suddenly interrupted with a bewildering remark which enabled me to turn away from Dorius.

'Spanish War?' Joe asked. 'You ain't old enough for that.'

At first I did not understand him at all, and when I did, I answered as mildly as if his remark had not been in the least outrageous. 'I don't mean the Spanish-American War. I mean the ——' Then the shock broke over me. I stopped. 'Look — do you mean you never heard of the fascist war in Spain?'

'Spain wasn't in the war,' he said defensively. 'Spain was a neutral.'

'My God!' I exclaimed. 'Didn't the Army give you any kind of political education?'

'What do y'mean?' Joe asked. He was sitting up stiffly, looking out suspiciously from under his heavy black brows. I saw that I had blundered into offending him, and I was sorry.

'Joe,' Jeff said, 'that was something back in 1938. No reason why you should know about it.' He glanced impatiently at me. 'Sit down. Joe was taught how to handle a gun. That was all he was supposed to know.'

'But Joe,' I said earnestly, putting out my arm, almost pleading with him. He looked at me sullenly, and Jeff said, 'Let him alone, Bill.' My arm dropped. I gave up.

After that, whenever anyone spoke, Joe watched suspiciously. His eyes kept their narrowed, sullen look, and he sat rigidly in his chair, with his shoulders hunched and his head ducked, a little like a boxer. He listened as though each

remark were about him, but made in a foreign language which he did not understand. We all kept on drinking, but Joe's drinks did not relax him, any more than mine, now, could loosen my tongue.

At last Lynn jumped to her feet. 'Betty, will the radio wake the baby?'

'No. Go ahead. It won't bother her.'

'I want to dance,' Lynn said, turning the dial, and when some soft, waltzy dinner music came on, she pointed at Joe and added, 'I want to dance with you.'

Daphne looked up quickly and Joe said, 'I can't dance.'

Lynn took his hands and pulled him up. 'You can't dance! Why — listen, Joe, don't tell me — listen, Joe ——'

She was staggering, but she managed to pull him to the side of the room and they started to dance. She put her arm around his neck and laid her face against his, and while he could not dance very well, her expression seemed to say that he was divine.

Whether she thought she was entertaining us, or whether she was only indulging herself in a drunken way, I have no idea, but when the music stopped, she clung to him and said, 'Do me a real favor, Joe? Give me a kiss?'

He backed a step away from her. 'Quit kiddin',' he said.

'I'm not kidding, Joe,' she protested. 'Please! I've never been kissed by a hero.'

Pat stood up as Lynn seized Joe's arms and pushed her bosom against his chest. 'Joe...' she murmured. Pat walked across the room quickly and got between them. He took hold of Joe's shirt and said, 'Take it easy.'

Joe stiffened. 'Look, bud, I ain't ——'

Finally Jeff got out of his chair. He went over and stood between them, and Mac and I followed. 'Go sit down, Lynn,' Jeff said. 'You, too, Pat.' We were all furious with Lynn, but we had formed a kind of semicircle around Joe which must have made him think that we were all lined up against

him. His glance darted from one of us to the other and his fists clenched. Then Jeff broke the semicircle when he stepped past Joe to turn off the radio.

Daphne was standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, and Joe flung a glance at her and said, 'Let's get out of here. Wise guys!' I caught my breath when I saw that he had singled me out with his eyes, and that they seemed to be burning.

'Look, Joe, I'm sorry ——' Jeff started.

Joe did not answer. He seized Daphne's arm firmly and led her to the door. 'Good-bye, and thank you,' she said, but Joe, scowling, said nothing, and steered her out through the door and then pushed it shut behind him with a clatter. Outside, as they went up the drive, they began an argument. Lynn went to the door. 'The girl's going in. He's going up the road.'

'That was pretty raw, baby,' Pat said.

She turned and looked at the room. Her eyes widened and she smiled. 'Did I do something?'

I stared at her, revolted that it should have been she and I together who had blundered with Joe Henry, and while my motives may have been better than hers, my failure in tact had been as great, and it forbade any attempt at self-justification.

We had supper. Betty steamed two large buckets of clams and we ate them in the middle of the room, sitting on the floor like Indians around large bowls. Then we had coffee, and then highballs. Mac and Pat Dorius had an argument about foxhole atheism. Mac said that he would defy Pat to go into combat and not start praying, and Pat, after reminding Mac that combat was over, said that he was certain he would feel no differently about God in combat than he did in any of the sudden hazards of civilian life. Mac, I felt, pointed to some persuasive distinctions, but while he was talking, Betty Jane

cried out in a bad dream. Betty went in to quiet her, but she did not come back, and when Mary went to see why, she found Betty stretched out on the child's bed, sobbing quietly, and the child asleep again. I talked defensively about liberal journalism after Pat made some unnecessary remarks about the confusion of the liberals, and I answered some questions from Mac about cartels, and some time after that, in the kitchen, over a fresh round of highballs, Jeff and I had an unsatisfactory talk about his future. When we came back into the living room, Pat was explaining with his thoughtless confidence why he was opposed to any governmental control of scientific research. Someone turned on the ten o'clock news. And then, finally, Mac's call to Indianapolis was put through.

He talked earnestly and with increasing agitation for twenty-five minutes, while everyone tried to think of topics for conversation and to pretend that they did not hear him. At last he put down the receiver, quietly this time, and came slowly back into the center of the room. He sat down in a chair between Jeff and me, and as soon as the conversation started up, he said quietly, 'Jeff, what'll I do? She still says she's sick. Sick! When I asked her why she had been out since four-thirty if she was sick, she said it was nervous sickness. What should I do?'

Lynn Barker heard him, and she said, 'Mac, I don't think your wife wants to live with you.'

He looked up sharply. 'Why shouldn't she? I'm stationed out here, why should she stay in Indianapolis?'

Betty said, 'Well, Mac, it isn't a comfortable life, moving around, you know . . .'

'Plenty of women would rather be uncomfortable and ——'

'Mac, be brutal,' Jeff said. 'Look at it this way. She was out from four-thirty until ten-thirty. With girl friends? Maybe. But probably not. You were away for over two years. Before that, you lived with her for four months. Figure it out. Twenty-nine months against four.'

Lynn sat up. 'No, Jeff, I don't believe it. I don't think that's it at all. Mac, I have an idea that your wife just doesn't like sex. Or at least she doesn't like it as much as Indianapolis.'

Mac's face flushed deep red. There was a horrid silence in the room. Then he opened his mouth to reply, and suddenly we all heard a strange noise from outside which stopped him. Someone was shouting, and at first we could not understand the words, but the shouting came closer, and then we understood the words. 'You bastards! You bastards! You wanna fight? Come on. I'll take you all on!'

It was Joe Henry, drunk, shouting over the wind.

Lynn jumped up, and in that room, with the particular arrangement of the lights, her figure made an abrupt and gigantic shadow across the rafters. Jeff said, 'Lynn, sit down! Don't move, anyone.'

My lethargy was transformed. I leaned forward, electrified. All life suddenly seemed to be beating at the door, and I said, 'He's living through that battle again. Listen to him. It's a haunted brain. Who could blame him for drinking?'

'Bastards, every damned one of you! By God, I'll ——' The autumnal wind took the rest of it away.

Suddenly Mac jumped up. His face was dark red with his own humiliation and outrage. 'Okay, you son of a bitch,' he muttered, 'I'll take you on,' and he ran for the doors.

Pat Dorius jumped up. 'Take it easy,' he said, and there was a crazy pattern on the rafters as he moved.

'Sit down, Mac,' Jeff said from his chair.

'That guy's not fighting any battle,' Mac said, turning back to us. 'It's us he's yelling at. He hates us! I'll let him have it ——'

'Mac, please!' It was Betty, almost screaming. She ran to Mac and pulled at his arms. 'You can't! Just think ——' she implored. Mac looked at her and began to relax. 'Please, Mac,' she said, 'sit down.'

Then we heard Joe Henry again. 'You bastards! You bastards!' he was still shouting, and we could all picture him standing in the driveway, his legs apart, the black hair in his face, shaking his fists at the barn. Mac relaxed. 'The poor dope,' he said, and sat down.

'You bastards!' we heard again, but more faintly. The wind whipped his words away from us. Then through the windows in the door we saw the upstairs lights go on in the cottage. A door slammed, and we knew that Daphne had come down to urge him in. Everything but the wind grew quiet, and then suddenly the wind died too. Everyone leaned forward, and we could hear the sly sound of the dry leaves sliding down to the dry grass. No one spoke.

Then Pat Dorius stood up. 'It's late. I'm going to bed. Come on, Lynn.'

Lynn got up and stretched. 'Good-night, all,' she said, and blew a kiss to the room. We watched them climb the stairs together.

When they had closed the door, Mac, still looking up, said softly, 'Who's lucky? Who gets off easy? Who hasn't been bothered? Who, in fact, came out on top? Who gets the pretty girl?'

No one answered him, but Mary threw a desperate look at me, and then, as though she were about to cry, she wailed, 'Oh, how dreadful! How really dreadful! Does it all come down to this? Do you really think it's us that boy is cursing?'

Jeff stirred in his chair. He said, 'Sure, Joe hates us. Why shouldn't he? Joe is the people, Bill, that you keep talking about, and the people get bewildered. Joe doesn't know what to hate, so he hates the world. It's a big passion.'

Then Betty, without raising her voice, said, 'That's one more passion than none at all.'

Everyone stared at the floor. Outside, the wind blew and stopped blowing and blew again, and the leaves rattled. And — where are we, I said to myself, what have we lost?

Then my mind came rapidly down the habitual spiral of its thought, from the implications of the broad situation to the narrow, single center. I had lost something, but already I could feel the hardening of a new stubbornness. Suddenly I knew that I had never earned Mary's devotion, and in the same moment that devotion filled me with a positive disgust, as if something damp and sickening clung to me. I did not even wonder when she, forced by my hesitations, would begin to withhold it. I knew only, and with a revulsion of supreme distaste, that I no longer wanted it at all. In the end, it is our very weakness which drives us to the most barren outposts of ego, those bleached towers in deserts.



## 29

### *What We Don't Know Hurts Us*

THE MID-AFTERNOON winter sun burned through the high California haze. Charles Dudley, working with a mattock in a thicket of overgrowth, felt as steamy and as moldy as the black adobe earth in which his feet kept slipping. Rain had fallen for five days with no glimmer of sunshine, and now it seemed as if the earth, with fetid animation like heavy breath, were giving all that moisture back to the air. The soil, or the broom which he was struggling to uproot, had a disgusting, acrid odor, as if he were tussling with some obscene animal instead of with a lot of neglected vegetation, and suddenly an overload of irritations — the smell, the stinging sweat in his eyes, his itching skin, his blistering palms — made him throw the mattock down and come diving out of the thicket into the clearing he had already achieved. 'Jesus!' he said, panting.

'Is it hard?'

He looked up and saw Josephine, his wife, sitting on the railing of the balcony onto which the French doors of their bedroom opened. She was holding a dustmop, and a tea towel was wrapped round her head, and her face seemed pallid and without character, as it always did, to Charles, when she neglected to wear lipstick.

He snorted instead of replying, and wiped his muddy hands on the seat of his stiff new levis. Then he walked over to the

short flight of steps that led up to the balcony from the garden, and lit a cigarette.

'It looks as though the ground levels out up there where you're working,' Josephine said.

'Yes, it does. Somebody once had a terrace up there. It's full of overgrown geraniums that are more like snakes, and a lot of damned rose vines.'

'You've got the pepper tree almost free.'

He looked up at the pepper tree, with its delicate, drooping branches and the long gray tendrils that hung down from the branches to the ground. He had chopped out the broom as far up the incline as the tree, and now he could see that a big branch of the eucalyptus at the very edge of the property had forced the top of the pepper tree to grow out almost horizontally from the main portion of its trunk. 'Look at the damned thing!' he said.

'It's charming, like a Japanese print.'

'I'm going to hate this house long before it's livable,' he said.

'Oh, Charles!'

'I didn't want to buy a house. I never wanted to own any house. I certainly never wanted to own a miserable, half-ruined imitation of a Swiss chalet built on an incline that was meant for goats.' Vehemently he flipped his cigarette up into the pile of brush he had accumulated.

Josephine stood up and shook out the dustmop. 'Let's not go into all that again. There was no choice. It's no pleasure for me, either, living the way we are, nor is it for the children.' She paused, and then she added a cold supplement. 'I sometimes think that your disinclination to own anything is a form of irresponsibility.' She turned swiftly and went into the house.

He stood staring after her, frowning a little, for it seemed momentarily that with studied intent she had cracked the bland habit of her amiability. But in a minute she reappeared in the doorway and said matter-of-factly, 'I heard on the

radio that Boston has had eighteen inches of snow.' Then she went back inside.

'Are you trying to make me homesick?' he asked of no one as he started back up the incline, and he remembered the frozen river, snow blowing over the Esplanade, and city lights faint in a blizzard.

He began again to chop at the roots of the broom. All right, he told himself, so he was being unpleasant. He did not like the idea of being pinned down by a mortgage to a place his firm had picked for him. He did not even like the idea of being pinned down by a mortgage. To own something was, to that extent, to be owned, and he did not like the feeling. His idea of a good way to live was in a duplex apartment owned by someone else, in Charles River Square, or, better than that but always less likely, in a duplex apartment owned by someone else, on the East River. He connected happiness with a certain luxury, and, probably, sexuality with elegance and freedom. These were not noble associations, he was aware, and he knew that it was foolish to let impossibilities, as they faded, become forms of minor torture. This knowledge made him chop more angrily than ever at the broom.

It was vegetation with which Charles felt that he had a peculiar intimacy, perhaps the only thing in California which, in the several weeks they had lived there, he had really come to know. And he loathed it with a violence which he recognized as quite undue, and which, now, made him feel childish and curiously guilty. Yet he could not laugh away his loathing. The stuff was ubiquitous, and sprang up anywhere at all the minute the ground was neglected. If it grew up in a patch, it began a foolish competition with itself, and the thin, naked stalks shot ten and twelve and fourteen feet into the air, all stretching up to the sun for the sake of a plume of paltry foliage at the top. Then the foliage tangled together in a thatch, and when you had managed to chop out the shallow roots of the tree, you still had to extricate its trivial but

tenacious branches from those of all its neighbors to get it out of the clump. Once it was out, the wood was good for nothing, but dried up into a kind of bamboo stalk so insubstantial that it did not make even decent kindling. As a tree it was a total fraud, and in spite of the nuisance of its numbers, and of its feminine air of lofty self-importance, it was, with its shallow roots in this loose soil, very vulnerable to attack. Charles beat away at it in an angry frenzy, as if he were overwhelming, after a long struggle, some bitter foe.

He did not hear his son come up the incline behind him, and the boy stood quietly watching until his father turned to toss a stalk up on the pile in the clearing. Then the boy said, 'Hi.' He said it tentatively, almost shyly, as though his father's responses were unpredictable.

'Hi, Gordon.'

'What're you doing?'

'Can't you see? How was school?'

'It stinks,' he answered doggedly, his dark eyes half-averted and sorrowful.

Charles felt a twinge of pain for him. 'Cheer up. Give it time. You'll get to like it after a while.'

'I'll never like it,' Gordon said stubbornly.

Charles took up his mattock again. 'Sure you will,' he said as he began to swing it.

'Nobody likes me.'

Charles let the mattock come to rest and, turning once more to the boy, he spoke with an impatient excess of patience. 'You say that every day. I've told you it isn't true. You're a new boy in the school, and you came in the middle of the term, and there's never yet been a new boy who entered a school late who made friends right away. You're nearly nine, Gordon, and you can understand that. Anyway, I'm tired of explaining it to you.'

'When can I get a paper route?'

Charles laughed without humor. 'My God, boy! Give us a chance to get settled.'

'I need money.'

'You get an allowance.'

'I need more money,' the boy insisted. 'I want a paper route. How do kids get them?'

'You can work for me. You can get in there with a hedge shears and cut out all those vines.'

The boy looked at his father despairingly and shook his head. 'No, I need a lot of money.'

'You can earn a lot of money working for me,' Charles said, swinging his mattock.

'I need a dollar,' Gordon said faintly.

His father did not hear him, and he did not turn from his work again until presently he heard his daughter calling him shrilly from the foot of the hill on which the house stood.

'What is it?' he called back. She was climbing the path, and he saw that she had a white envelope in her hand.

Then Gordon broke into rapid, desperate speech. 'I need a dollar. I'll pay it back out of my allowance. Remember yesterday I told you about that dollar I found? I have to pay it back.'

Charles stared at him. 'What dollar?'

Gordon glanced wildly over his shoulder. His sister, holding the menacing white envelope in one hand and her workman's tin lunchbox in the other, was halfway up the hill, coming along the side of the house. Pleadingly, Gordon looked back up to his father. 'The dollar. Remember? I told you I found it. You wanted to know what I did with it.'

'What dollar?'

He sighed. 'You didn't listen! You never listen!'

Charles patted his shoulder. 'Now take it easy. Don't get excited. Tell me again. I don't think you told me anything about a dollar yesterday.'

'The dollar I found. You asked me what I did with it, and I told you I gave it to Crow, and you said I should have brought it home to you.'

‘That Crow! I thought you were joking.’

Penelope, the six-year-old, was behind him now, and Gordon’s shoulders sagged in despair. ‘I wasn’t joking,’ he said almost wearily as Penelope handed his father the letter. ‘You never really listen.’

Charles read the precise handwriting on the envelope. ‘Mr. or Mrs. Dudley,’ it said, and in the lower left-hand corner, ‘Courtesy of Penelope.’ He opened the envelope and read the message:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dudley:

Gordon became involved in some difficulty about a dollar today, and I wish you would help me. The dollar was lunch money belonging to a girl who says she left it deep in her coat pocket, in the cloak room, yesterday. When I brought it up with Gordon, he immediately said that he did not steal it. He says that he found it on the floor, and he also says that he told his father about it yesterday and that his father said he should have brought it home to him, and now he is fixed in his confusions. He gave it to an older boy named Will Crow, who spent it, and I have told Gordon that he will have to return a dollar to the girl tomorrow. Gordon is a very worthwhile little personality, but I do not think he has been entirely happy here at the Crestview School, and therefore, if you can help me straighten this out to his own best interest, I will be ever so grateful.

Sincerely yours,

Gertrude Grandjont, *Principal*

Charles groaned in exasperation. ‘My God, why did you have to drag me into it? What will that woman think?’

Gordon’s lips were trembling. ‘You remember? I did tell you, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, I remember now. I remember very clearly that you told me you found it on the way to school, and when I asked you what you did with it, and you said you gave it to Crow, naturally I said you should have brought it home. *Listen,*

Gordon ——' The very simplicity of the boy's strategy infuriated Charles, and it was with an effort that he controlled his temper. He said, 'Penny, you go in now and tell your mother you're home.'

Penny was staring at her brother. 'What did Gordon do?'  
'Run along, Penny, as I told you.'

She went down the incline reluctantly, staring back over her shoulder, and when she had gone into the house, Charles turned to Gordon again and said, 'Sit down.'

They sat down side by side on the damp slope. Gordon said, 'Will you lend me a dollar and keep my allowance until it's made up? I have to take it back tomorrow.'

'We'll talk about that later.' Charles tapped the letter with his muddy hand. 'Why did you tell me you found it in the street?'

Gordon looked away but answered promptly. 'I knew if I told you I found it in school, you'd have said I should have taken it to the office.'

'So you lied to me instead. That was better?'

Gordon did not answer.

'Answer me.'

'Yes.'

'Yes, what?'

'I lied.'

That was that. Charles started over. 'Why did you tell Miss Grandjont that you did not steal it when she hadn't even said that you had?'

'I knew that's what she thought.'

'How did you know?'

'I just knew.'

Charles hesitated. When he spoke again, his voice was warmer, friendly, almost confidential. 'What's the little girl's name, Gordon?'

'She's not little. She's in high fourth.'

'What's her name?'

'I don't know. Joan, I guess.'

'What color is her coat?'

Gordon glanced at his father sharply. 'I don't know. I never noticed it.'

Charles bit his lip in exasperation and stood up. 'Let's go inside.' He led the way in.

Josephine was standing on a chair in the middle of the living room. She was dusting the hideous chandelier of dark metal and colored glass which hung from the center of the ceiling. It was only one of many distasteful features in the house which the Dudleys hoped to rid it of, but it was hard to find men to do all the necessary work, and none would promise to do it quickly. An electrician had torn away a good deal of plaster and lathing, and a carpenter had ripped out some bookshelves and ugly mantels and taken down most of a wall between the dining room and a useless hallway, but neither had returned, and painters, plasterers, paper-hangers had not yet come at all. The Dudleys had decided to leave most of their belongings in storage until the work was done, and to bring nothing out of storage that they cared about. The result was that the house was almost fantastically disordered and bleak and squalid, and while Josephine managed to keep an even temper under these conditions, Charles, who found them very trying, did not.

He stood in the doorway of the living room now and said to her, 'Why do you bother?'

'The light was so dim,' she said, and then, seeing his expression, asked quickly, 'What's wrong?'

'Another problem.' He came heavily into the living room and gave her the letter. She read it standing on the chair, her face expressionless. Then she stepped down and went out into the hall where Gordon was lurking and said, 'Come in, dear.'

There was one old sofa in the room, and Josephine sat down there with Gordon. Charles sat facing them on the single

straight chair. Josephine took Gordon's hands and said, 'Now tell me everything, Gordon, just the way it happened.'

The boy's face was composed in a kind of stolid determination, but when he raised his moody eyes from the bare floor to his father, his chin began to tremble, his eyelids fluttered, and suddenly the dogged expression broke in despair, his body sagged, his head fell back against the sofa, and he burst into harsh sobs. Josephine put her arm around his shoulders and held him close while he cried, and she shook her head sharply at Charles as he jumped up impatiently. He sat down again. Finally Gordon stopped crying, almost as abruptly as he had begun.

'How did it happen, Gordon?' his mother asked.

He straightened up and stared at the floor again. 'Nothing happened. I just came in the cloak room and saw it on the floor. I took it and put it in my pocket, and at recess I gave it to Crow.'

'Didn't anyone see you pick it up?'

'There wasn't anyone else there.'

'In the cloak room? Before school? Why not?'

'I was late.'

'Late? But why? You left here in plenty of time.'

'I stopped on the way and played with a cat.'

Josephine frowned. 'So there was no one else there at all to see you?' she asked meaningfully.

'No.'

Josephine glanced at Charles. He drew his lips apart and, with a heavy satiric edge, said, 'Well, Gordon, that's too bad! If there'd been someone else there, you could prove that you hadn't ——'

Josephine broke in. 'Tell me just where the dollar was, Gordon,' she said softly, and her voice had no relation to the look in her eyes as she glared at Charles.

'On the floor.'

'But exactly where. Was it near the little girl's coat?'

'She isn't little.'

'Was it near her coat?'

'I don't know which coat is hers.'

'Was it near any coat?'

'It was on the floor, near all of them. They hang on a rack, and it was on the floor near them.'

Josephine paused, and Gordon wriggled his shoulders out from under her arm and slumped in the corner of the sofa, away from her. 'When can I get out of here?' he asked.

'When you start answering our questions,' his father said sharply. 'You insist that you didn't steal it?'

Gordon raised his lids slowly, as if they were very heavy, and stared out at his father from under his brows. 'I found it on the floor.'

Josephine spoke brightly. 'Very well. We have settled that. But Gordon, surely you don't think that because you found it on the floor, it belonged to you? Don't you see that it was just as much stealing it as if you had really taken it from the pocket of the person it belonged to?'

'Not as much,' Gordon said.

'But it wasn't *yours*! You knew that.'

The boy nodded.

'Well, then ——'

'Someone else would have found it!'

'But would someone else have kept it?'

'I didn't keep it.'

Charles leaped up from his chair. 'That's the point! Why in God's name did you give it to that Crow rat?'

'He's my friend,' Gordon said with simple defiance, and then he slid off the sofa and lay on the floor.

'Your friend! A fine friend!' Charles shouted in disgust, standing over him. 'Get up!'

Gordon did not make any effort to move, and Josephine grasped Charles's arm. 'Let me,' she said quietly. 'Sit down.'

'Nonsense!' he cried angrily at her, and pulled his arm free of her touch. 'I'll take over now.' He seized the boy by the shoulders and pulled him up on the sofa. The jerk which he gave his body made the boy's head bob back and forward like a doll's, and he slumped against the sofa back almost as if he had been injured, dull eyes staring out of his pale face. 'Now listen to me, Gordon. I don't know if you took that money out of someone's pocket or not, but it looks, from the way you're behaving, as if you did. Anyway, you took it. It didn't belong to you, you knew that, and yet you took it. Do you see that there is no difference between the floor and the pocket as long as you kept it?'

'I didn't keep it,' Gordon repeated, but almost listlessly. 'Oh, my God!' Charles ran his hand through his hair, and the rumpled hair gave him a sudden wild look. 'Listen,' he said as quietly as he could, 'we are all having a very hard time here. We are trying to live in a house that isn't fit to live in. I am trying to get used to a new office. Your mother ——'

Josephine said, 'Don't bother about me.'

'I will bother! We are all having a tough time, and Gordon can't think of anything better to do than to get into this mess at school. Of all the friends you could pick, you pick that nasty Crow brat, who is too old for you by three years and is a snide little ——'

'Charles!'

Gordon lay back in the sofa. He looked ill and defeated.

'Will you admit that you stole that dollar? That taking it from the floor was just as much stealing it as if you had taken it from the pocket?'

'Yes,' he answered faintly.

'Speak up!'

'Yes, I *do*!' Gordon cried, and turned his face away.

Then the room was very still. Josephine stood stiffly beside the couch, her eyes fixed on Charles with dismay.

Charles sagged a little, as if he, too, were defeated. And Gordon might have been asleep or dreaming, so remote had he suddenly become. Then they all heard a sly noise at the door, and Charles and Josephine swung toward it. Penelope stood there, embarrassed to have been caught. She giggled and said, 'Why did Gordon steal money?'

'Go away,' Charles said.

'Go to your room, dear,' Josephine said, 'or go outside.'

'But why did Gordon steal money?'

Charles walked to the girl, gave her a little push, and closed the door on her face. Then he came back to the sofa. He sat down next to Gordon, and when he spoke, his voice was nearly lifeless. 'You want to earn that dollar. All right, you can, Gordon. First go to your room and write your five sentences. Do them quickly for a change, and then go out into that patch of broom with the hedge shears and cut down all the vines you can find in it. You have an hour left before it gets dark.'

Gordon's eyes dreamed over his father's face, and then he slowly got up and left the room. His parents watched him go, and when he had closed the door softly behind him, Charles broke out. 'What is it, what stubbornness, that makes that boy so impenetrable? Did he steal that money or not? I haven't the slightest idea. All I could do was force him to admit that there was no difference between the two things.'

Josephine was looking at him with studious appraisal.

'Well?' he challenged her.

'You forced his admission. Did that gain anything? And what did it lose? How much did it hurt him? Is it of very great importance whether he stole it or not?'

'I don't know what's more important.'

'No, I really think you don't.'

'Well?'

'What's more important is why he took it, and what he did with it, and why he did that. What's more important is that

he's a miserable little boy, and that you haven't made the slightest effort to understand *that*. All you've done is played the heavy parent, shown him that you don't trust him or believe him, and left him with a nice new layer of solidified guilt, and what is he supposed to do with *that*?'

'Let's skip the psychology for a change,' Charles said. 'There is an old-fashioned principle of honesty and dishonesty.'

'There's a more old-fashioned one of simple perception!' Josephine's face was red with anger. She stood in the middle of the bare room and looked rapidly around her, as if she felt a sudden desperate need, a hunger, for objects. But there was only the sofa, the chair, and Charles. Her eyes came back to him.

'Have you thought of his difficulties at all? Just the simple matter of his writing, for example? He came from a school where the children printed, and he printed as well as anyone. He comes here where the children do cursive writing, and of course he's made to feel like a fool, and he has to practice at home to learn it when other boys are playing. Or have you once helped him with that? Have you even suggested a sentence he might write? No. All you've done is given him the extremely comforting bit of information that new boys, especially if they enter school late, have a hard time making friends! The one friend he has made, you deride. No, don't interrupt. I know he's a horrid boy. I don't want Gordon playing with him either. But you haven't the sense to see that what has brought them together is that they are both pariahs. I think Gordon's giving that dollar to that dreadful boy is one of the most touching things I've ever heard of!'

'If what you've told me about Crow is true,' Charles said quietly, 'I won't have Gordon playing with him, and that's that.'

'Because Crow taught him some nasty words and told him

some nasty, mistaken things about sex? You're perfectly right. But you can't just stand there and say *no* to him! If you were half a father, you would have told him yourself. *You* should be his friend! You're the one who should be giving him a decent attitude toward those things. *You are* his father, after all.'

'Oh, listen — He's not even nine!'

'All right. But he's getting it, isn't he? And all wrong?' And then, without warning, she sat down heavily on the single chair and began to sob, her reddened face lifted, her mouth twisted in sorrow, tears streaming down over her cheek. '*All wrong!*' she wailed.

Charles went to her quickly and, half standing, half kneeling beside the chair, awkwardly put his arms around her. 'Josephine, listen ——'

'Oh, I know!' she sobbed. 'We all get in your way. We're all a nuisance that you're saddled with! We all just *bother* you. I know. It just isn't your idea of the way to live. You really *hate* it, don't you?'

His arms tightened. 'Darling,' he said, 'don't be a damned fool. Listen, I love you, I love the kids. Why, little Penny, I ——'

'Oh, yes. Penny, sure! She's tractable! She doesn't raise any problems. That's different!'

'You're crazy. Gordon, too. You. Maybe I'm not much good with him, but that doesn't mean — And listen — I'll try. I'll go out there now.'

She dug in her pocket for a piece of kleenex. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes. She pulled the tea towel off her head and shook out her hair. Then she blew her nose again. 'I'm all right now,' she said, getting up. She picked up the dustcloth which she had flung over the back of the chair, and she said, 'It's probably just this awful house, the way we have to camp. I'm going to get cleaned up and dress and I'm going to find a tablecloth, and we'll have dinner at a

table tonight, instead of sitting on the floor with plates in our laps.'

He said, 'Good girl! I'll go and fix it up with Gordon.'

Charles went into Gordon's room. It was empty. He glanced at the table where Gordon worked and saw that there was a sheet of writing there. Then he looked out of the window and saw the boy on his hands and knees in among the remaining broom. He crossed the hall to the bedroom where Josephine was dressing. 'I may not be very subtle with him, but I seem to get results,' he said. She merely glanced up at him, and as he went out on the balcony, down the steps, and up the slippery incline, he felt no satisfaction whatever in his remark.

'How's it going?' he asked the boy.

Gordon glanced over his shoulder. 'All right,' he said, and turned at once to his job. The hedge shears made a busy, innocent sound.

Charles found his mattock where he had dropped it and began to chop at the edge of the overgrowth again. Immediately his nostrils filled with the poisonous smell he had noticed before, his hands began to chafe, and even though the heat of the sun had gone in the late afternoon, sweat broke out with a prickling sensation all over his face and body. Once more he was tense with irritation, and he said, 'That awful smell! What is it?'

'I don't know,' Gordon replied without looking up.

'Like something decaying.'

The boy did not answer, and Charles chopped angrily away at a root. When it came free, he shook the earth off and tossed the slim tree down the slope. 'This crazy, piddling stuff!' he shouted, and then reminded himself that it was only a kind of exaggerated weed, a thing that grew everywhere, so futile that it could not even send down a decent root, and was hardly designed as a personal affront to him.

Or was it? He laughed and started to chop at the next root, but stopped at once. 'I'm quitting for today,' he said. 'Come on, let's go in.'

Gordon said, 'No, I'll work a while. I want to earn the money.'

'Oh, let it go. We'll fix that up.'

Gordon stared at him. 'I want to earn it,' he said, and went on clipping at the rose vines.

'All right,' Charles said, 'but come in soon. You'll have to wash up thoroughly to get that muck off.'

He went back into the house by way of the bedroom, but Josephine was no longer there. He went into Gordon's room, but she was not there, either. On the table lay the white sheet of ruled paper covered with the boy's writing, his five sentences in their hasty, uncertain, and very large cursive characters. Charles picked it up. The first sentence was, 'I am going to cut vins.' The second was, 'I am going to ern mony.' The third was, 'The sun is shining.' The fourth was, 'When it rains here it rains hard.' The last, which seemed to have been written with greater care, with a kind of precision and flourish which his writing had never shown before, was, 'You hate me and I hate you.'


Charles took a sharp breath and held it, then sagged. After a moment he walked to the window and put his forehead against the cool glass. He stared out into the desolate garden, at the bare earth and the darkening tangle, and tried to think. When he heard Josephine moving on high heels somewhere in the rugless house, he began to fold the sheet of paper, and he folded it again and again, until it was a small hard square. This he stuffed deep into his pocket.

He came into the hall and saw Josephine standing in the center of the barren living room. She looked tall in an old but still handsome black housecoat, a straight, severe garment which hung from the tightly belted waist in heavy folds and was without ornament or color anywhere. Her hair was

pulled tautly away from her face, and her face was smooth and white, and her mouth was painted dark red.

She was detached from the room, from the house, and utterly from him — remote and beautiful, cold in a resolution. Never in the ten years he had known her had she appeared so wonderfully in possession of herself. And helplessly, his scheme irrelevant, absurd, Charles turned away.

He went into the boy's room again, and looked out to see the boy. But twilight obscured the garden now, shadows hung about it like veils, and Charles could hardly see into the trees. Then he thought he saw the boy's shape, hunched on the ground among the slim trunks; and he went quickly out to find him. Perhaps, even now, after everything, it was the boy who, somehow, could help.



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## 30

### *In Uniform*

FASCISM IS NOT DEAD!' the pretty girl sang at the instructor as he came up to the college gate. 'Help picket Gerald L. K. Smith,' she said winningly, and held out a mimeographed sheet of white paper. She stood beside a card-table on which she had stacks of such sheets, and young Doctor Cochrane noticed that, although it was not yet nine o'clock, at least a hundred sheets already lay scattered in the street where passing students had thrown them.

He had a briefcase in one hand and books under the other arm, and in the hand which curved under the books he held the Milky Way bar which he bought in the restaurant where he had breakfast and which he liked to eat before his first class. It was awkward for him to take the sheet the girl held out to him, and as he clutched at it, the candy bar fell to the sidewalk.

'Oh, sir!' she cried, and picked it up. She thrust it into his hand, and he smiled at her and looked straight and boldly into her blue eyes. He thought he saw her falter, and he counted the steps he took — eleven — before he heard her sing out again in the bright voice, 'Fascism is not dead! Help picket . . .'

He felt very good. It was a sunny autumn morning with a deep blue and completely cloudless sky. The campus grounds lay before him fresh and green, a spacious and beautifully ordered garden, and the white buildings gleamed in the sunlight behind precisely clipped hedges and flowering bor-

ders. Here and there a few students sat in the sun, on the grass or on the steps of buildings, but it was still too early for the mobs to have begun their daily milling on the walks. Cochrane thought this the best moment of the day: it almost always made him happy.

When he was out of sight of the girl at the card-table, he dropped the sheet of paper. Then he threw back his shoulders and walked slowly toward Shipstead Hall, where his office and his classrooms were, and he thought he could feel on his back the interested eyes of the lounging students. He was a good-looking man in his late twenties, with cropped, dark hair and a very tan face. His clothes were expensive and casual — a white shirt with buttoned down collar and red knitted tie, a rather long Harris tweed coat, gray flannels slightly pegged and rather short, and heavy, thick-soled, highly polished dark brown brogues. His clothes gave him satisfaction, and especially early in the day, when they were still completely fresh, and as he went up the steps of Shipstead Hall, he was quite aware that he felt as though he were on a stage set. The sensation pleased him, somewhat in the way that he was pleased when he read slurring remarks about 'tweedy professors' in book reviews. Such remarks, rather than causing him chagrin or annoyance, gave him some positive elation, a renewed pleasure in his rôle in life.

His sense of well-being shriveled and died on the instant that he turned into the corridor where his office was. Two people stood waiting in front of his door. One was a student — it was Gerhardt, that disgusting German nuisance, who did not matter; but the other was Jessica, looking at him with tragic mournfulness. Cochrane's first impulse was to turn on his heel and simply walk away from her, but the presence of the boy made that impossible. Then he was suddenly angry, and he let his feet come down hard and deliberately on the floor as he came toward them. He ignored Jessica and nodded to the student. 'I can't see you before class,' he said.

'I did not understand, sir, some of these, your comments. . . .' He held out a composition. A broad piece of adhesive tape was plastered over his nose.

'Well, leave it with me. I can't see you now. See me after class.'

The boy stared at him stupidly, then gave him the paper, and Cochrane turned to his door. He put down his briefcase, dug in his pocket for his keys, unlocked the door, picked up the briefcase, and walked into the office. He snapped up the drawn buff window shade, put his books and the briefcase on the desk, unwrapped the Milky Way bar, and turned to the open door. 'Yes?'

Jessica came in slowly and closed the door behind her. She leaned against it dispiritedly and looked up to see him vigorously chewing. Her dark eyes filled with tears.

'Oh, my God!' Cochrane groaned. 'Let's *not* have another scene.'

'Denny . . .'

'I've told you never to come here to the office.'

'Denny . . .'

'Do you want to start gossip? Standing in front of my door looking as though your mother had died?'

Her tears fell. 'You can't pretend that I simply don't exist,' she said.

He looked at her wearily. Her loose dark hair was stringy and her lips and cheeks were pale, nearly gray. Her rather broad, soft features, which had once seemed to him Oriental and subtly sensual, now seemed merely coarse. Her gray gabardine suit needed pressing and her moccasins needed a shine. She stood as if her body were exhausted. He looked away from her, out of the window at the tops of trees, and said, 'You ought to take care of yourself. Don't go around looking like a grubby graduate student.'

'I am a graduate student. Or I'm supposed to be. That's the only reason I'm bothering you. My work's going to

pieces. Everything's going to pieces. I can't keep my mind on anything. I can't get my mind off you, you bastard.' She spoke tonelessly, as if she had no feeling about him at all.

He sat down on the edge of his desk and chewed at the last piece of the candy bar. He wiped his hands on his handkerchief and said, 'What do you want me to do? Pretend? You're a big girl now.'

'You always pretended. You never cared about me at all. As a person, I'm nothing to you — nothing. You didn't even respect me, because I couldn't do anything for you. I was just something you could use until someone better came along, and a dean's homely daughter is better. Oh, I know all about it. And I know that you're really a nasty snob——'

'You're not notably increasing my respect,' he said coolly, and glanced at his wrist watch. 'Look, I have a nine o'clock. Do you mind . . .?' and he began to shuffle his notes and his books together.

She did not speak again, but before she turned to go she gave him a full, long, bitter look, then wavered, but opened the door at last and went unsteadily out. Not her bitterness, but the pallid lifelessness of her face, the drained illness in it suddenly disturbed him. He almost called her back, but hesitated, too, then sat down on the edge of the desk and opened Gerhardt's composition.

It was called 'Why I Want To Be A Diplomat,' and Cochrane laughed as he had when he first saw the paper — half in revulsion, half in pity. Trust Gerhardt to choose the career most weirdly unsuitable to him! Yet of course it was not the boy, but that Prussian ogre, his father, who had made the choice. Unwittingly, the boy had revealed early in the course that when he got less than a 'C' on a paper, his father whipped him. At eighteen. Cochrane felt that he had, from all of Gerhardt's autobiographical writing, an intimate acquaintance with this brutal figure, as he had with his obedient,

righteous mother, and even with the old dead grandfather who loomed over the family still from the abandoned European shadows. In Germany the family had had money and position, had owned considerable land, and had lived part of the year in a castle in a forest which Gerhardt, in overwrought and non-idiomatic prose, never tired of describing. They had been refugees — late and reluctant refugees, obviously, and the sort who managed to come out with a lot of cash — and Cochrane could not understand why they had felt it necessary to leave at all. With their main family tradition the inflexible strain of paternalistic authoritarianism, they should have been quite content to remain. Yet here they were, naturalized citizens, the boy morbidly immersed in memories of a Junker childhood which to him was like a lost Eden, willingly submitting in the family structure to as much of its moral tradition as it had been able to transport and retain, and yet blunderingly struggling not only to educate himself in the traditions of American history and literature, but even to make his career in government service. It was too absurd.

Cochrane glanced at his comments in the margins. It was probably the father, not the son, who had been unable to understand these remarks. 'Nationalist jingoism,' Cochrane had written in one place, and 'Thoughtless flag-waving' in another. There was an extended comment on patriotism and anti-intellectualism, and the usual scattering of symbols which meant trite, 'fine' writing, comma blunder, and idiom. Idiom, after eight years of American schooling, remained the boy's main difficulty, even now that Cochrane had discovered and forbidden the method of composition which the father, who supervised all his work, had made him follow. This was to write out his papers in German and then translate them into English. German no doubt persisted as the family language, and as long as it did, Gerhardt's writing would be non-idiomatic. Sometimes Cochrane had a furious impulse to send the father a blistering letter, and if he had felt any liking

at all for the boy, he would long ago have done so. But it was quite clear that the boy himself felt that his father was right, and that Cochrane must be wrong, and as long as that was true, Cochrane was damned if he would help him. How could he?

He got up to go to his class. He was hot with anger. Between the two of them, Jessica and Gerhardt had managed to ruin a perfectly good day.

When he walked into his classroom, he began to feel a little better. It was a small section of Freshman English, a course which combined the writing of themes with the reading of certain standard American authors. Cochrane was about to give a lecture on Thoreau of which he was particularly fond. It was concerned with an idea which always came to students as a considerable novelty — the right of the individuality to *be* individual — and he had felt before that this lecture, by shocking them into an awareness of the extent to which social routines dominated them, really furthered their education by an observable step. He laid out his notes on the lectern, his marked copies of *Walden* and the *Journals* beside it, and looked at his watch. He was a few minutes early. Students were still straggling in. A conversational buzz still rose from those who were in their seats. Only Gerhardt, the earnest grind, sat with attention ready for the class, his notebook open, pencil poised, eyes staring owlshly at Cochrane through rimmed glasses resting on the plaster on his nose. Either he had broken his nose or he had had his septum removed. Cochrane turned away from him in dislike and walked over to a window to wait. He stared out at the ivy-hung white wall of the Library across the way from Shipstead.

A sudden movement drew his eyes to the windows of a room which was apparently a first-aid place for girls. He had speculated in the past on the nature of sudden female illnesses

which required, at the heart of a campus, a special room equipped with a hospital bed and screen and staffed by a uniformed nurse, and he had looked over at the room curiously now and then in the hope of discovering something interesting. He had never seen anything except the nurse, but now, when he had not been watching, something had happened, and Cochrane was tense with alarm.

The thing had happened so quickly, and his attention had been so relaxed, that he could not be positive that he had not imagined the details, but what he thought he had seen was the nurse supporting a girl across the room, past the windows to the bed, and pulling the screen partially before it, and the girl had dark loose hair and was wearing a gray suit. There was definitely a girl on the bed now. Were those *brown* moccasins on the feet at the end of it? Before he could decide, his view was abolished by the stiff white back of the nurse as she bent over the foot of the cot and pulled a blanket over the person on it. Then she moved the screen a little more, so that the bed was entirely hidden from view, and she hurried across the room and out of sight. To a medicine cabinet? To a telephone? Some horrible catastrophe, or a complete collapse which would lead to irresponsible talk, hysterical revelations? My God! Cochrane thought, what had that fool girl done? His hands gripped the window sill, his body leaned forward tensely, and he was straining his eyes to see something more when he became aware of the silence behind him.

He glanced at his watch. It was several minutes past the hour and the class was waiting for him, but he was much too agitated now to lecture. He waited a moment, and then, with a spurious air of purposefulness, walked to the desk and picked up his copy of *Walden*. He flipped through the pages, glanced at marked passages here and there, and found one which would serve. He looked up and said, 'I am going to have you write today — impromptu.'

He paused, and in the pause the class groaned in gentle unison, and then began a busy shuffle as they pulled out notebooks and pens with the air of elaborate resignation which they always affected when he made this sort of assignment. He waited for them to quiet down, his eyes irresistibly drawn to the window where he had stood, and to the windows beyond; from the desk he could see nothing at all but the flat glare of morning sunlight on the glass.

'I'm going to put a sentence from *Walden* on the board, and I want you to think about it, and then write as briefly and lucidly as you can a paragraph or two — no more — telling just what Thoreau meant by this sentence and what connection the sentence has with the meaning of the book in general. It won't take an hour, and you can go when you're finished.'

He turned to the blackboard behind him and in large letters copied the sentence from the book. '*If it is necessary, omit one bridge over the river, go round a little there, and throw one arch at least over the darker gulf of ignorance which surrounds us.*' He turned to the class again. 'Any questions?'

Miss Bates raised her hand. 'Will you tell us from which chapter it comes?'

'No,' Cochrane said. 'It doesn't matter. Any other questions?'

There were none. Several students began at once to write. Others gazed into the air with expressions indicative of thought or a total absence of it. Gerhardt stared at Cochrane with a doglike look which said, 'You, sir, have the answers; please tell . . .' Cochrane left the desk and went back to the window.

Desperately he fixed his eyes on the windows opposite, and he kept them there, and his body rigid, as, bit by bit, everything inside him fell to pieces. The tenuous supports of pride and charm and minor power snapped like brittle sticks, and in the wave of fear that swept over him then, he felt his life

wash utterly away — the years of study, the struggle for position, the social effort and the polite dinner parties with his superiors which had capped it; the honest achievement of his brilliant little reviews for the quarterly magazines on which his critical reputation rested; the caution, the circumspect planning, even plotting, which, step by step, had brought him just to the point of promotion to a position of tenure as well as prestige — security at last, and a decent salary. Everything went in a rush — everything.

His eyes ached from staring. The nurse occasionally bustled out from behind the screen, only to disappear behind it again with cloths or vessels. His body stiff with attention, but everything inside him limp in terror, Cochrane waited for the fatal moment when the screen would be pulled aside and his doom would be sure.

Sure? It was sure now. He was convinced that the girl was Jessica. She would have had just the right amount of time to drag herself from his office to the Library. Then what happened? Not something horrible like a suicide attempt! But even taking it at its least catastrophic — suppose she collapsed sobbing on some bench in a corridor. Or she threw hysterics. He could hear the sounds she made — the harsh, ringing, half-theatrical laughter by which she meant to dismiss him forever, and then the real, uncontrollable gasps, her face twisted in despair as he had seen it once. Or she fainted, and students picked her up, and she muttered his name. The progression from any one of these was inevitable — the nurse, the dean of women, a note from the dean of women to Mr. Hubbard, the dean of the faculty; Mrs. Hubbard's hurt face, and her talk with Joan; meanwhile, an interview between the dean and the chairman, then the hushed, disgraceful dismissal, and his career blasted, and ten years of academic effort. Then where would he go? He would have to start all over in something else. He took his sweating hands off the sill and wrung them together in an agony.

Fingers snapped behind him and he turned round. It was Gerhardt, of course, whose hand was in the air. 'What is it?'

'Sir, does he mean *real* bridges?'

'You're supposed to have read the book,' he said without force.

'I don't understand ——'

'I can't tell you, Gerhardt. No more questions, please. You're disturbing the others.'

He turned to the window again, but now he forced himself to think about Gerhardt. What made him so disgusting when he should have been only pitiable? His mealy eagerness to learn, when his mind was so thick? His polite Prussian kow-towing, the suggestion of heels clicking and spine stiffening when he spoke to you? Or was it that nasty sense of family which came through all his writing, and which gave him a kind of pompous rectitude in spite of his skinny, dark-suited vulnerability?

The nurse came to the windows opposite him and opened one of them, then put out her hands before the opening to test the draft. As if in sympathy, Cochrane opened the window before which he was standing, and for a moment, he thought, his glance and the nurse's caught and held, and he found himself wondering if she could possibly know who he was. Then she turned away. He had a clear view of the room through the opened windows now, but nothing happened in it. Then two girls from the class arose and walked to the window with their papers.

'That was hard,' one of them said, and he smiled wanly at her and looked out again.

To avoid a repetition of that devastating sense of losing hold of everything, he tried to fix his mind on Gerhardt's childhood at the same time that he continued to watch the window. He tried to picture the castle in the forest, the baronial halls, then something specific and detailed like the ritual of mealtime, but these partial images slipped away

from him and he remembered sharply his own childhood instead, sudden unwanted glimpses of the flat, baked glare of a farmyard in summer, of the flies clustered on a kitchen screen. And then he remembered, for the first time in years, an awful episode in the barn, when, after carelessly breaking a little-used but greatly treasured fishing rod of his father's which he was forbidden ever to touch, he got down on his knees in the straw and prayed in a panic to God that his father not discover it, and, in mounting fear of the whipping he would get, he promised God every imaginable kind of penance and fidelity if God would let a long time elapse before his father found that it was broken. And even as he felt again that childish frenzy, and felt it mingle and become one with his fear now, he recognized the logic of his memory, and his mind began to say to itself, *'God, don't let it be her, and I'll be kind to her, I'll be good to her, don't let it be her and I'll stick with her ——'*

Two more students came up to him with their papers, and then another. The class was rapidly completing the assignment. He was half turned to the room, and as his hands automatically took the papers from his students, his eyes kept darting back toward the Library. *'Don't let it be her, and I'll give up Joan. I'll do anything ——'* Three students put their papers on the desk and left the room.

*'All of you just put your papers on the desk when you're finished,'* he said weakly, and turned to the window. Now he pressed his sweaty hands together as though he were really praying, and his mind kept rattling off its fervent promises. He hardly heard the sounds behind him, the students walking out, the door opening and closing as the class grew smaller and smaller. *'I'll do anything, I'll marry her if she insists, God, anything at all, only don't let it be her, or if it is, don't let her talk.'* Once he turned round again to glance at the room, and he saw that only Gerhardt was still there, bending over his paper, chewing the end of his pencil, and he thought,

*'God, I'll be good to Gerhardt, I'll spend an hour a day with him helping him, anything, anything ——'* He turned back to the window.

Then, finally, the nurse pushed the screen back. Cochrane's hands ached from the violence with which he gripped the sill. Then he went limp all over, and his body leaned weakly against the wall. The girl was standing up, rubbing her hand over her face, and her dress was not even gray, it was blue, and her hair was black, but it was short. He laughed, and his head suddenly felt so light with relief that he thought it would float out over the room.

Gerhardt was looking up at him, and for the first time Cochrane's eyes rested on him with a kindly tolerance. He went to the desk and sat down behind it. He smiled softly for his folly and told himself that he must never again lose his grip that way, or forget so completely his position. He rubbed his hand over his sleeve and took a new delight in the feel of the rough, expensive tweed. Then he laughed aloud once more in a burst of pleasure, and he said, 'Don't worry about me, Gerhardt! I just remembered something funny. Aren't you finished?'

'Yes, sir,' He gathered his books together and came up to the desk. He handed Cochrane his paper and he said, 'Could you tell me now about that other, please?'

'Here it is. What bothered you?'

'You didn't like my patriotism, sir?'

'I tried to point out that patriotic emotion, like any emotion, is not a substitute for ideas. You must have understood that.' Cochrane felt his dislike for the boy again. He felt it in his face, as the muscles in his jaw seemed to tighten with his irritation. 'Was it you who couldn't understand, or your father?'

'Well, sir,' the boy said, hesitating, but pulling himself even more erect than he already had been, 'my father thought if you could expand upon your remarks to me ——'

'I thought so. *You* understand them, don't you?'

'I think so, sir.'

'That's all that matters.' Cochrane stood up and put his books and notes together. 'What happened to your nose? Did you have an accident in the gym?'

'No, sir.'

'Sinus operation?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, what then?' Cochrane asked curiously as he came round the desk and stood in front of it with the boy.

'You see, I want to go into the diplomacy, as I wrote you in my paper. My father wants me to look as American as possible.'

'American? What do you mean?'

'Well, my nose, it was a little ——' The boy sought for a word. 'Humped,' he said at last.

'You mean ——'

'My mother is Jewish, of course, and my father thinks ——'

Cochrane could feel the irritation of weeks draw together in him and then explode. He said, 'You're disgusting, Gerhardt. What do you mean by American? You haven't learned a thing. You wouldn't know what Thoreau meant by individuality if you read *Walden* ten times. You don't know what it means to be yourself. All you want to be is your father's self.' He shook his head dolefully. 'Try to wise up,' he said.

Gerhardt had stood rigidly erect, as if at attention. With each of Cochrane's sentences, his eyes had blinked, as if he were manfully receiving a series of justified slaps in the face.

Cochrane pulled himself up as erectly as the boy. 'My God!' he said, studying his face, and swung on his heel toward the door. He could feel the boy's bewildered eyes staring at his tweed-covered back as he fell into his usual easy stride.



## 31

### *The Shame of the Man on the Egg*

IN THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA, at a time when the national destiny was very uncertain, a female ostrich abandoned her egg. Several explanations of this apparently unnatural act were published, and of these the one which received the least attention was the explanation of Henry Windrift, a minor attendant at the zoo, who took the neglected egg home and hatched it himself. He declared: 'The bird's right. This isn't a time to hatch anything. We got more than we can handle now.'

His observation, certainly the most simple and downright of all, was quoted now and then in the newspaper accounts which reported the incubative period, but it appeared so seldom that no one observed the contradiction in Windrift's attitude. If, in its wisdom of the age, the ostrich had abandoned the egg, what business had Windrift to encourage it? This paradox was one of several which were lost sight of in the general sentimental interest which the situation aroused, for of the three characters involved in the drama — the female ostrich, the man, and the egg — it was, at first, at any rate, neither the man nor the egg who commanded the public interest, but the ostrich. This was entirely because of the official explanation which came from the zoo. The ostrich had abandoned the egg not because of a despair of the world but because of frustrated love; her mate had been ogling a female in the next cage and the mother had deserted the egg in a fit of jealous passion.

This, the romantic explanation, won out over all others which came from various persons connected with the zoo — won out over the scientific explanation that something was wrong with the egg and that the ostrich in her animal wisdom knew it, and over the ethical one that the ostrich had always shown a streak of irresponsibility and meanness, almost as easily as it won out over what we may call the political explanation of Windrift. And for a time the emphasis of the newspaper accounts was placed almost solely on the behavior of the loveless ostrich and of the state of her cage life; but since nothing much happened there, and since Windrift, as he sat on the egg, began to give out statements to the press, the emphasis shifted to him.

Henry Windrift was an innocent-looking individual of more than middle years who had never before attracted attention to himself or thought of attracting attention to anything else. He was slight and wiry, with dry, thinning reddish hair, and of an amiable disposition even though his lined face and his scrawny neck gave him a dour look. He was married to a woman of about his age and disposition and even physical type, and for years they had lived together without any disturbance whatever and in almost total obscurity, indeed, anonymity. They had no children, and their pleasures were the few and simple pleasures of the poor — a glass of beer and a cheese sandwich, an occasional movie, and the life of the street as this could be observed from two wicker rocking-chairs on the front porch, where they sat in the evening, without garrulity, behind a row of potted geraniums on the rail. Their life had had an even tenor.

Yet in the year that the ostrich abandoned her egg, Henry Windrift had felt an increasing nervousness, and having no other reasonable explanation, he attributed his nervousness to the rising cost of living. It is perfectly true that the cost of living had been rising, and that the Windrifts, who were of necessity economical even in times when Henry's wage went

farther than it did in that year, had been having a hard time satisfying their humble needs. It is also true that Windrift had taken to brooding about this problem, and that, as he went about his duties in the zoo, he more and more came to feel that the national economy was not a system in which he was a functioning part but rather a system which opposed itself to him, that he survived not because of it but in spite of it, and only then by dint of unremitting ingenuity and scheming. These thoughts were not so articulated as this in Windrift's mind, but surely they comprised a *feeling*, and this feeling in turn engendered other feelings, of melancholy resentment, and of fear at the prospect of a totally insecure future in an unpredictable world which had not really made a place for him at all. Unknown to himself, perhaps, Henry Windrift had developed a sense of his separateness, of his life as one thing and the life of the world as another, and of the necessity of pitting his life, somehow, against the immense hostilities which comprised the life of the world.

If none of this really got into Windrift's mind, it just as certainly did get into his nerves. And if his explanation of his nervousness — the cost of butter and eggs and tomatoes, and the increasing difficulty of meeting his rent — was too simple for the facts, it is nevertheless true that the rising cost of living was one very clear sign of an increasingly unstable condition in civilization. As prices continued to rise, Windrift's resentment grew with his nervousness, and it ceased to be a melancholy resentment and became simply an angry one.

At the same time, preoccupied as he was with his own problems, he began to make blunders around the zoo. Inattentively feeding the lions one day, he very nearly became their food; a zebra died through his failure to observe its first symptoms of illness; a valuable bird escaped. Since he had always prided himself on his efficiency, these episodes increased his anger, and after the third of them he went to the manage-

ment and impulsively asked for a month or six weeks in which to rest and recuperate.

It happened to be the day on which the ostrich had laid her egg, walked away from it with a look of disgust, and, when her mate attempted to sit on it in her place, attacked him in a rage and drove him from it. The episode caused considerable interest among the people at the zoo and the spectators, and presently a number of newspapermen appeared. The keeper of the zoo was a man who regarded his humor highly, and when he was interviewed, he gave the reporters the romantic explanation. Shortly after that Windrift appeared to make his request, and it was probably because the keeper was so pleased with the immediate success of his story that he agreed not only to let Windrift have his long vacation but also to take the egg if he wanted it. Windrift had a collection of odds and ends from the zoo — an embryo marmoset in formaldehyde, some small mounted birds, a number of snakeskins — and it was his plan to add the egg to his cabinet. At the ostrich cages he encountered photographers taking pictures of the rival hens and the male, and it was then that he made his statement, 'The bird's right,' et cetera. The egg had been in full sunshine all day, and when Windrift went into the cage with a box for the nest and the egg, the egg was warm to his touch. As he picked up the large object it occurred to him that ordinary hen's eggs should be at least as big as this to justify their inflated price. When he came out of the cage and the newspapermen asked him what he was going to do with the egg, his anger for the first time flashed into an idea. He said, 'Look at the cost of living. Somebody's got to do something. I'm going to sit on this egg until it hatches. The country's going to the dogs.'

The men laughed and turned back to the birds, which interested them more than Windrift. He went home with the egg to tell his wife how he planned to use his vacation.

A certain change began to come over Windrift. It expressed itself immediately in his announced determination to make the most of hatching the ostrich. 'Get those chairs out of the way,' he said to his wife on the porch, and carefully put down his box. 'I'm moving out the Morris chair.'

The Morris chair was the most comfortable in the Windrift house, and Windrift knew that it was the only chair on which he could possibly sit with his legs drawn up under him. Furthermore, it had casters, and although California nights are usually warm and Windrift planned to sit as much as possible in the public view, he felt that on chilly nights, for the sake of the egg as much as his own, he would want to be able to move the chair into the house. And so, to the considerable astonishment of his wife — for no change had come over the character of that mild woman — the matter was arranged. The wicker rockers were pushed aside to make room for the Morris chair. The nest was put well forward on the seat and Windrift lowered himself gently onto the chair, the body of his weight behind the egg, his thighs partially covering the nest and pressed against the sides of the egg, and his lower legs pulled up before it. It was by no means a comfortable position, but it was a possible one for a man as slight and wiry as he.

Then began the long period of incubation, of Windrift's public protest against the condition of his world, and of his contemplation of his separateness from it.

At first only a few of the neighbors noticed, and they collected in a group before the house and stared at Windrift. 'Butter — eighty cents a pound when you can get it,' he shouted at them, and they glanced at one another uneasily and moved away. The news spread. People in neighboring blocks went out of their way to pass the Windrift house, and the angry voice would boom out from behind the fringe of geraniums: 'Oranges — sixty cents a dozen in the orange state!' Automobiles began to slow up in front of the house

and stop, and the passengers peering curiously at the man on the porch heard him shout, 'Bacon! Cheese! Bottom of the round!'

In a few days the men from the newspapers decided that Windrift was interesting after all, and they gave up the ostrich for the man who had taken its egg. The substance of their first interview was little more than a barrage of price quotations. 'You're wrong about watermelon,' one of the reporters said. 'It went up to twenty-five cents a pound today.'

'Twenty-five cents! So much the worse.' But Windrift had come to pride himself on the accuracy and the extent of his statistical information, and the result of his error was that he now began to read the newspapers lest he be caught in another. He had seen newspapers all his life, and in a cursory way he had even read them, or at least parts of them, but he had never before had the leisure or the opportunity to read them with care, minutely, column after column, page after page from beginning to end. And the result was that, so late in his life, Windrift suddenly beheld his world in revelation. Not only the exorbitant cost of things, the misshapen economy, but the long rigamarole of crime, the habitual venality of statesmen, the vast non-representation of the people by their governments, the selfishness of nations and the endless conflict of their interests, the development of more and more destructive implements of war, the attempt of feeble good will to express itself in international arrangements which would be more powerful than any separate concentrations of power, and the monstrous growth of Statism — all these, too, now crowded upon Windrift's attention. In some dim way they had all been called to his attention before, but never before as a single spectacle. And now it began to seem not only that he was in conflict with the world, but that the world was in a hideous conflict with itself. Thus Windrift, past middle age, became a reflective man, while his embar-

rassed wife shuddered in the house behind the lace curtains because of the spectacle he made of himself outside.

Yet for all the horror of his discovery, Windrift felt that his nervousness had gone. Sitting on the egg had proven to be not only a protest against the condition which had made him nervous but a cure for his nervousness as well. He contemplated the destructive spectacle of the world with the righteous calm of the sage who sees and understands all. And at his next interview he said: 'The world needs more egg-sitters. I was a nervous wreck when I began to hatch this egg, and now I am fit as a fiddle. Tell the world leaders, the dictators and the premiers and the presidents, to get themselves an egg to sit on, and they will get over the fear which makes them quarrel and makes nations fight.'

Only a little more than a week had passed but Windrift was already a changed man. Not only had he become a good deal more aggressive, with a sure awareness of his own strength and effectiveness, but his anger and his resentment had been transformed into a serene complacency which arose from the sense of his own rightness. This is not to say that he did not issue angry jeremiads when called upon by the press; he did; but the anger now was a rhetorical flourish suitable to the rôle of prophet, and those who are interested can trace a considerable development of the oracular style if they will study his progressive utterances over the three weeks of his fame. He had himself resolved that once the ostrich was hatched, he would not return to the zoo but would become a lay preacher of some kind (he was not quite sure what kind), crusading from city to city and laying bare before men their doom. When he announced these rather vague plans to his wife, it was she who became angry. She snorted in impatience and told him that he had better get his mind back on prices and the need of eating.

The enthusiasm of the press and of the public grew as Windrift's reforming zeal widened. Before the end of the

three-week incubation period, he had made pronouncements on nearly every subject of general interest, and he even began to show a trace of rather heavy fancy when the clothing shortage led him to remark on feminine fashions. But in general he maintained a solemn mien and dealt with only the most serious subjects. His final remark before the young ostrich actually broke its shell, was: 'If the inventors of the new bomb could feel the reverberations inside this egg as I am now feeling them, they would think twice before proceeding with their devilish destruction. In their folly, they are tampering with the universe, with the very order of God and Nature! Armageddon! Armageddon!'

When the ostrich actually broke out into the world, the Windrifts were alone, and since it was a cool night, Windrift was indoors and there were no observers in the street. This was at once fortunate and unfortunate. It was unfortunate because the public perforce depended on Mrs. Windrift for its information, and she had not become the articulate kind of person that her husband had. On the other hand, it was fortunate in that it spared Windrift a display of what was apparently to him a hideous disgrace.

'Where's Windrift? Where's Windrift?' the reporters cried at his wife next morning.

She spread her hands. 'Gone,' she said.

'Gone! Where's the egg?'

'Hatched.'

'Where's the bird?'

She spread her hands again. 'Gone,' she said.

'Gone? Why?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know,' and then she flared up, 'Let *me* alone!'

'But Mrs. Windrift ——'

'I thought he was taking it out to the shed in back, but he never came in again.'

'He ran away?'

She shrugged her thin shoulders.

'What happened?' They pressed her into the Morris chair and told her to be calm. 'Now tell us just what happened.'

Briefly she told them. 'The little bird broke the shell and stood up blinking on the seat. The light must have hurt its eyes. It looked at Mister and he looked at it, and then he said, "My God!"'

'Go on, go on.'

'He said it looked like him.'

They smiled. 'Well, what of that?'

'He couldn't stand it, I guess.'

'Did it look like him?'

She shrugged. 'He always looked a little like an ostrich,' she said.

'Yes,' they agreed slowly, 'so he did.'

'But *he* didn't know that.'

'No, of course not,' they said. 'But what of it? What of it? Why should it upset him so that —'

'I don't know, I don't know,' she said, and begged them to go away.

The less conscientious writers simply reported the disappearance of Windrift as evidence of eccentricity. Those who had come to like him or who had an interest in psychology suggested that too long and intimate an association with the egg had induced in him some unconscious identification which unbalanced him, and they recalled his earlier nervous condition. A really careful student of Windrift's utterances, however, will find a more plausible explanation, perhaps, in the theory that when he saw himself in the product of the egg, that sense of his separateness from other things which had become more and more powerful in him the longer he sat on the egg, was destroyed, and that this disturbance in his attitudes caused him grief or humiliation so profound that he

could no longer face the world. At any rate, man and ostrich both disappeared and neither has been heard from since.

Do we need Windrift? That is an urgent question, but all that can be said with any certainty now is that since his disappearance prices have continued to rise, nations grow increasingly stubborn with one another, and new weapons, mysterious in their potency, are tested by experts in remote places on land and at sea.



## 32

### *The State of Mind:*

#### *Excerpts from the Letters of a Lover*

... **A**ND OFTEN, my dear, being a little disturbed, you have asked me why I have kept this house all these years — a place so barren of any charm in this age, so dingy now, and for so long without use. I have never been able to tell you. But now it has use, and now I know that I have kept it for this obvious reason — to return to it, to have it here when I needed it.

Its ugliness should cause an architect nightmares, but somehow it does not bother me at all, even though I wonder how in a village so rich in examples of the best humble domestic architecture that we have ever produced, three or four such late Victorian horrors were allowed to deface the whole. Have I described it to you in the past? It is a narrow, tall house, built on a hill, with much scrollwork around porches and roofs, and a great abundance of it on the five turrets of different shapes and sizes which jut up at meaningless intervals. The yellow paint has nearly peeled away, and the white trim is gray. The wrought-iron fence around the property is rusty and broken. Inside, the house is dark, and yesterday as, preoccupied with something, I came along a corridor, I nearly pitched down one of the innumerable flights of steep, narrow stairs.

Yet, as I say, none of this stupid ugliness troubles me, and I cannot think of a better place to which to retire and collect

myself. You will be glad to know that I have really managed to put the world out of mind, and with it the horrors on which, in the city, my attention had become more and more fixed — gas chambers, vast crematories, metallic glitter, charred skeletons on devastated fields, country lanes choked with burned-out wreckage, the smell of decay, the wail of sirens, automatons in laboratories — *No!*

Later, still at my desk.

I broke it off. You see, that is what I can do, and with increasing ease. It is the only way that I can shut it all out. These images come to one like other images, as sense reports, and there is a trick which formerly my mind played on my senses, without my intending it, that I can now play on them nearly at will. Of simply closing them, and having no sensation at all. It is a condition of great peace and ease and blankness, not euphoria, but absolute withdrawal. You will think this a mistaken discipline, but it is the only one I know that can help me, and believe me, dear, it has brought relief. I am ever so much calmer than when I left to come here. I am beginning to feel that I am one person, not a half dozen all trying to move in different directions.

... yet it was probably exactly because you thought this house represented something like that to me, a symbolical bulwark, a representation of a past from which I was unready to detach myself — exactly because you suspected this that, having no faith in a retreat into symbols, you were uncomfortable that I should hold on to it. Your faith is in retreat, too, but of a less private order — analysis, a sanatorium. That is because you are really a reformist in the deepest sense, with the catastrophic trust of the last two centuries in a willed selection and a plotted change. But in the deepest sense I am a conformist, trusting to self-collection and identity, interested not in being changed, but simply, entirely, in

*being*. The remark I have so often quoted to you — ‘The task of the human being is to become what he already is’ — suggests, decrees a solitary task. To retrace the steps of factitious ‘becoming’ — all the meaningless accretions of experience which most people are content to think of as their *selves* — until we arrive at what we really *are*, is to demand aloneness. How could I admit your professional intruders into that necessary privacy? How could I admit you?

And then — ‘nervous breakdown’! I have never really known what is meant by that term, but I do know that never in my life have I been more at peace with myself than since returning here. I am very nearly complacent. I!

This change comes not only from the fact that I have been able, since returning, to shut myself away a little from the distracting images of the world. Even you, in the complacency of your easy answers, will admit that those images do distract. Wedding rings and dental fillings! You see how our sweetest and our humblest objects have been corrupted by the universal murder. On that day when we first discovered what was happening to me, it was those wedding rings which had filled my mind, thousands of gold wedding rings wrenched from the fingers of the doomed in the death chambers and collected, properly catalogued, by the damned, on poles! Has any horror in history, unless it is the treasure chests of dental fillings, been so grotesque? I came out into the street that morning, on my way to the office, with that grotesquerie in mind, and you remember what happened. Hours later I found myself miles from my office, in an alley between warehouses, sitting on a pile of boards, with no notion of how I had come there. A bedraggled cat rubbing against my leg brought me to my senses.

I leaped up with alarm, and was dizzy then with the vividness of things after that lapse into nothingness. A square of sunlight on the concrete blazed like white fire among black shadows that were like slabs of substance, shadows with

thickness, and weight! The skin on my leg under the trouser where the cat had rubbed burned with feeling. A train on elevated tracks near-by seemed to be inside my ears, real hammers on the very drum. And the cat, moving slowly away, was electric with a vicious animation, *alive*. Perhaps I had never before felt life as a fact, as a force, as a thing in itself; or the pain of sensation, the assault of the world on the body, the shell-fire of impressions on the helpless, hapless senses. It was a suffocating experience, with overwhelming pressures like those which one must feel when drowning or when buried alive. I may have yelled as I stumbled out of there, feeling that life had been let loose upon me like a pack.

I found my way to you, you put me to bed, a doctor came, he gave me something, and I slept. Late that afternoon, when I woke, I was well again, and the experience of the morning seemed almost impossible. You thought, naturally enough, of some form of amnesia, but as we talked, I remembered earlier events which had seemed trivial when they occurred — my absent-mindedness, we had thought — but which, as I recalled them, took on their proper meaning as symptoms. Mine, I think, is a more peculiarly modern condition than amnesia, and is still without a name.

But I did not begin this letter simply to remind you of what you know. I wanted to tell you of this new calm, which comes only partially from my removal, much more from the lingering, pervasive effects of a dream I have almost every night. The dream itself seems to be possible only because I am living here, under the circumstances, more or less, of my childhood. The contrast between the dream and the actual circumstances of my childhood contains of course an obvious irony, and what a retroactive wish! Yet I have it, and it has these astonishing effects in a contemplative reverie which, in turn, completes my removal and shuts out finally those images which trouble me.

You know the queer story about the death of my parents

which, when I began to gain some prominence as an architect, was circulated among our friends and finally throughout the profession. It grew, fantastically, as an explanation of why I developed the ramp to replace stairs, and I am fond of this story as an example of the extremities to which your psychology will go to explain our motives and explain away our creative efforts. The story was that as a boy of eight or nine I walked into the front hallway of this house where I am now living by choice, and saw my mother at the top of the stairway take aim with a revolver and shoot my father just as he was starting up the bottom, and then, as he fell backward, turn the gun and shoot herself, and tumble down. I need hardly seek out such a fabrication in extremity for the contrast which provides the dream.

The dream is static, pictorial rather than dramatic, a tableau. I am in the tableau as a child, yet I must be outside it, too, as an adult observer, as a point of view, not as a participant but as the omniscient. In the tableau there is no action, but simply a pictorial representation which has the double quality of the finest primitive Italian painting and the cheapest, most tawdry modern religious or calendar art. There are three figures, my parents and myself, and there is a fruit tree in moderate flower, there is grass and dew, there is a vista of ideal landscape, mainly blue, but above all, there is benignity. Benignity which I cannot describe but which, as I try to now, comes powerfully over me, like peace, like sleep, a luxuriance of the non-sensory.

Is it from the structure, from . . . My darling, I must close, I cannot continue, I am too sleepy . . . But believe me, I am much better, I am well . . .

You wished to know from my fragmentary last what it was that I began to say about structure. I wondered whether it was from the graphic *order* of this persistent dream, from the obvious diagram of the tableau that the vast benignity I

mentioned chiefly arises. Can mere composition become the agent of such composure? I should hardly think so. Yet the simple, stable design must be a large element in the satisfaction that the dream provides. The design is diamondlike, with the suggestion of a parabola around it. At the foot of the diamond is the figure of the child; each parent provides one of the lateral angles; and the upper angle is the top of the tree. The parental figures are grouped immediately beside the tree trunk, and the child's immediately before it, but through some foreshortening, the effect of the diamond shape is emphasized. The tree, with its neat, symmetrical round of foliage, as in certain primitive fashions, suggests in turn the large oval around, provided by mountains above the horizon which fall away from some invisible peak behind the tree, and by slopes below it, which meet in some invisible valley behind the child. I will not go into the details of costume and position which duplicate in miniature the larger pattern, but it is important to understand with what care the dream is fashioned, with what attention its order is solidified.

Yet I would not press only this order. The odd pastoralism of the content likewise expresses the benign, and though this is the element which, to an outsider, must seem absurdly sentimental, a ridiculous parody of peace, it gives me both in dreaming and in memory only pleasure. The three figures wear some kind of loose, Biblical garments, and their feet are bare, and they stand in dewy grass. Beside the feet of the child is a rabbit, tame, indeed, immobile, only its eye alive. The three figures stand rather rigidly in their angular relationship, and their faces are utterly impassive, blank with love and pity, as abstract as Greek or Gothic statues, transcendent of their particularity.

Have I made it clear that it is not as the child in the dream that I feel, but as the observer of the child, observing him and the relationship in which he exists? That is important, for it is that which gives the dream-image its religious quality: it

presents itself, as an object, for adoration. It is an icon. And as I understand this, I am of course reminded that once, like my father, I was an atheist; not a militant atheist as he was, but, like him, derisive of religious emotion, and certain of the treachery of all icons!

Color is the third element in the dream. I am certain that when I first dreamed it, there were many colors — green for slopes and grass and tree, brown for rabbit and tree trunk, pink for blossoms, blue for mountains, red and blue for garments, and true flesh tones in the figures. But now, for several nights, I have been aware of only one color, if it is color. It must be blue in all degrees, even to the flesh, the upturned palms of the boy, the parents' hands extended in blessing, the empty faces, the bare feet. A phrase comes to my mind from the poet, Blake — 'the blue feet of death,' but there is no alarm in that.

Yet is it color at all? Last night . . . ? Was is not more like a simple interchange of light and shade, of depth and surface . . . ? And calm, calm, calm . . .

The questions in your last I had to put off until today, when I am less drowsy than that last writing made me. I will try to answer them at once. You say that you wonder how I fill my time. That has not been a problem. I have found an old college algebra text here in the house, and now and then I work out a long problem. But in the main I do exactly what I came to do — I rest; and I am still astonished that I have such a capacity for resting, having always been somewhat more than normally energetic. Surely it is a sign of relaxation? It is so easy, in my aloneness here, to extend aloneness almost indefinitely. Except for these letters to you, I have cut myself off completely from my old life — an easy thing to do when a doctor prescribes absolute release from professional responsibilities, etc. I see no newspapers or periodicals — they would only remind me constantly of the causes

which brought me here. I have made it clear to the few intrusive villagers — friends of that aunt of mine who lived in this house after my parents' death, and acted as my guardian — I have made it clear to them that I have not come to this place for the pleasures of rural company. Now no one molests me. (As for the physical needs which seem particularly to concern you, I am learning Thoreau's lesson — they hardly exist.) And so the qualities of this life are really only two — aloneness and emptiness; and my rest consists of increasing both, to make myself even more alone, free not only of attachments to persons, but to objects, to the multiplicity of *things*, and thereby increase my emptiness and escape the tensions which are *only* created by the things with which we allow ourselves to be filled. Thus I will overcome all self-division.

I manage this through a deliberate cultivation of what we called my absent-mindedness. It is a lovely word, *absent-minded*, with a drastic literal content which we obscure in our average use of it, exactly as, when we thought of it in me as simply an amiably eccentric habit, we failed to recognize its deeply symptomatic character. For I can see now that, when someone in the office spoke to me and I heard nothing, or when, quite blindly, I passed a friend on the street, or when, to your increasing exasperation, I could eat an entire meal not only without registering sensations of taste but even without, five minutes later, being able to name the things that made it up — I can see now that these events were not the result of a mind which had filled itself with more important matters, but actually of moments in which the mind had wholly absented itself.

What is to prevent one from extending such moments almost indefinitely?

I wish that I could describe to you this condition, in which one is absolutely alone and entire in the essence of oneself, the intrusive world utterly excluded, being unsullied by a

single filthy dilution of sense. But I am in that perplexing dilemma of the mystics when they attempt to describe their ecstasy: they are reduced to language, which is founded on things, to describe a state of being utterly transcendent of things. It cannot be done; yet the state exists. You asked what I read. I read nothing but the *Journals* of my philosopher, the only book I brought with me. Sometimes I read only one entry a day, sometimes not even that. His observations are so wonderfully abstract that one sentence supplies material for unlimited contemplation. Yet even he is driven to express himself in terms of the concrete, of matter. 'And now for a year's time,' he writes, 'for a mile's distance in time, I will dive below ground like the Guadalquivir; — but I shall come up again!' *Dive below ground* — that is not at all what he means, but how to express it otherwise?

So, too, I shall dive below ground, and I too shall come up again, not reformed, but formed in my essential self. What we have lost in modern life, in spite of all our talk of the value of the individual, is the individual, respect for and knowledge of the *identity*, that which we are in our very selves. There are always these two things, the self and the world, and the second, if permitted, destroys the first, through the well-known principle of divide and conquer. For several hundred years we have deliberately hastened the process. Almost all modern philosophies, collectively called Liberalism, and the resulting institutions, have helped the world in its destruction of the self, as if our best efforts were all toward the end of systematizing murder, the quicker to corrupt ourselves. Modern man therefore is the subject of more divisions than have ever been known before — facts versus faith, politics versus religion, ethics versus love, money versus joy, and so on. And all these conflicts together make up the great conflict, the only singleness, the permanent war, which becomes larger and larger.

I will end this war for myself. There will be peace in *my* time. I will do it in this way . . .

No, you must not under any circumstances give further thought to the idea of coming here. I do not know what it was in my last letter which alarmed you, and I cannot predict how much I may alarm you in the future. What is clear is that we are taking opposing attitudes — my new calm causes you distress. Yet if we are ever to be together again, if our love is to be possible at all in our kind of life, then you must allow me, without question, without further threat of intrusion, to find out what I am in myself, to work my own discovery, in my own way. This is imperative, and the success of my venture, please remember, dear, depends on privacy and the certainty of maintaining it until it yields up its secret.

What alarmed you, I suspect, was my little discourse in praise of absent-mindedness, and perhaps I gave you the mistaken impression that I do not think at all. Of course, I do, and must, apparently. Here in this house I think a good deal of my parents, for example, and in contrast with the harmonious, peaceable beings of my dream, I am often made to remember them exactly as they were. They were a late and impoverished product of this barren soil which once nourished flinty, crusading genius. In them genius had narrowed down to rigid negations, to the hard eccentricity of single intellectual 'causes.' Both my mother and my father had retained the old crusading energy, but they had neither the audience nor the larger content of former times. They were, therefore, narrow, and queer, intolerant of one another as they were of people generally. My father hated religion with a violence, and my mother hated war, and hated it as violently as he hated God. He was the inheritor of the crudest Darwinianism, and preached 'scientifically,' like a latter-day Paine; she was heir to some elements in nineteenth-century Christian socialism. Each, out of his partial passion, constructed for himself a whole system of references which was made to account for everything. One explained human evil and all social misery by the use of force, the other, by the uses of

superstition. Their life was a grating together of these fragments of faith. I was caught between them as each attempted to compel my allegiance. When they died, it was as if one negation had canceled out another. Leaving me in the care of a relative, a sister of my father, who tried her best to gloss their harsh lives in my memory.

But I remember — and now I remember more clearly than ever before — their quarrels, the persistent bickering and nagging and strained, repressed anger. As often as not, these arose from money problems, for we lived in horrid penury which their eccentric reforming activities did nothing to relieve. They owned a small printing press on which they produced their broadsheets and their pamphlets, diatribes of compulsive bitterness and turgid exposition. The press is still in the garret, and I have come across boxes crammed with their yellowed works, and only a glance at these has renewed in me a very sharp sense of their lives which, in the course of my own, I had well nigh forgotten. I remember their quarrels about the use of the press, whose turn it was, whose work was the more important. Somewhere they must each have found a fanatic or two who was willing to help support their enterprises. Then, too, I am sure they developed more perverse ways of taunting one another. My father collected firearms which he kept in a locked glass case, and I remember hearing my mother threaten to destroy it. My mother, on the other hand, without being herself religious, liked to decorate the house with examples of religious art, in pictures and in plaster, and my father would surreptitiously go about the house removing these and hiding them from her. Then there would be another quarrel.

Shortly before their death, which was in an epidemic at the outbreak of the first Great War, their quarrels became violent. My mother, who seemed to feel that the war was a cosmic insult directed at her alone, lost her iron restraint, and I can remember her raging abuse of my father, who was preparing

to enlist in the army. They were both rather thin, gaunt people, and my mother's gauntness increased toward the end. My last impression of her face is that it was rigid in rectitude, with a kind of madness of purpose.

After their death, I nearly died, too. I fell ill of the same fever which had killed them. It did not abate for weeks, and I emerged from it finally with confused memories and no knowledge whatever of the fate of my parents. But in that long delirium, I suffered from strange nightmares which left permanent marks. My parents' zealous application to their 'causes' meant that the house had long been neglected, and the grounds around it were wild with weeds and trees and a tangle of shrubs, and in my fever I was always lost in this tangle and trying to find my way out to a wonderful white stone house of a simple, ordered beauty which I knew to lie somewhere beyond it. I found it, of course, years later, when I became an architect and could build such houses; that no one has ever known to gossip about.

I do not enjoy recalling any of this, and I write it all to you only to show you that, alas, a total absent-mindedness is impossible. Why has so much of this come back to me, with such force? What is the value of shutting out the public woe only to become involved at once in this private one? And I find that these remembrances, renewed now, corrupt my blue dream, disturb the bland presences in it, and that only by willing my attention can I preserve the pure design, that exemplary order which gives me peace . . .

. . . for it is as if I am fighting with all my volitional strength against some evolutionary process in the dream, some force within it to change, to grow away from what has given me such pleasure. I win, but at the cost of a stiff determination and much sleeplessness. I can easily control my waking hours now, shut off all desire, all sensuous response, by an effort of will that has become so nearly habitual that it

hardly seems an effort. But my sleeping hours are not my own, the dream takes over, and the dream has its own vitality.

This is what happens to it. The pictorial quality threatens to become active. The faces hover on the brink of expression, the limbs and bodies on the moment of movement, the landscape, indeed, the whole design, on the moment of change, and the blue seems about to shade off into something dimmer. I manage, somehow, to awaken, but in terror, and then only by the most concentrated study of the abstract figure of the dream, the diamond in the parabola held before me by my attention in the dark, do I overcome the terror and lapse back at last into something like peaceful dreaming. But then, suddenly, I am sitting bolt upright again, awake to resist that threatened change . . .

Yesterday I made a bad mistake. Because even my daytime complacency has of late been disturbed — I will tell you how in a moment — I took to some active work. Since, as soon as I arrived here, I dismissed the garrulous old man who had taken care of the grounds ever since my aunt's death more than a decade ago, the grass and shrubs had become overgrown in the several weeks that had elapsed. And yesterday, having for the first time to *find* something to take my mind off the subjects on which it seemed determined to dwell, I decided to work on the place and get the hedges and the lawn into shape again. This was a mistake in two ways: it did not really relieve my mind while I worked, and it exhausted me so that I slept much too soundly in the night.

The subjects on which my mind seemed determined to dwell. This is the curious thing, that absent-mindedness is not possible. One empties the senses, but the mind refills them, and in other ways. All day I had the strange sensation of *tasting* death, and when that sensation became so odious that I had to shut it out, my mind still worked, returning to

my mother's pacificism, my father's atheism, the hard, loveless, non-logical conflict of their passions. And when I plied the rusty hedge-shears the harder on the overgrown privet, its rasping sound came back to me, over gray years of forgetfulness, as their voices, the thin, interminable wrangling; and closing out this sound, I would find myself again with *thoughts* of discord, of men attempting to be more than men, of gods becoming something less; of tyranny corrupting the tyrant, yes, but incidentally abolishing the slave; of evil spreading like a fungus on a helpless body. And thus thought would lead me back to sensations, not the sensations of the visible world now, of the innocent clipping sound of the hedge-shears, for instance, or the sight of the peeling paint on the house behind the hedges, but a sensation much more sharp of a helpless body attacked by a disgusting disease, then of the body dead, then of putrefaction, then of intolerable odor, of rot . . .

My whole day was such a vicious circle, and working hard on the grounds did not break the chain as I had hoped. At last I stopped and went indoors, into the semidarkness of the house, and with great effort got all this out of me and for a few hours sat quietly in a peaceful coma. And that was wonderful, sinking deep, deep into the very center of nothingness, emptiness, emptiness, absence . . . Then I discover in the dark, motionless abyss the very thing I am in myself, essence of nothing, less than air, a formless dark . . . But I had tired out my body with that unusual physical activity, and when I went to bed, I fell into such a deep sleep that when the dream came and began to change I was apparently unable to awaken and prevent the change.

Thus I dreamed the thing that had threatened.

Blue died into gray, into dun. The parental figures stiffened into postures of evil, the faces grew vivid with hate and misery, alive with desperate feeling, and the child threw his hands over his face and screamed. The landscape behind

vanished in a rocky chaos, and with it the encircling form; and the diamond formed by the figures broke up as they moved. Tree and grass, slopes and the pastoral rabbit all vanished in the turmoil, leaving the figures in a new and bare and frightful relationship, on steps of cruel rock, the mother highest, the father below her, the screaming child at the bottom. I woke up screaming, too, just as I felt that one thing even more dreadful was yet to happen. I did not allow myself to sleep again, and all day today I have sat in a chair, vainly trying to induce the empty darkness which is not yet sleep. But I cannot find it, I can no longer hold in my mind that ideal form of the dream as it once was, and my brain is a dissolute chaos.

It is over now. I fell asleep at last in the chair. The mangled dream came once more, and this time it achieved that further dread. This is it: I am no longer the observing point of view, outside the dream, but the participating child, his horror mine, his screams, this time, my screaming as I wake.

It cannot last as horror. That must wear off. Already I am somewhat inured to its first full assault. Nothing is superior to habit, not even this frightfulness, not even the frightful, shrill, high whistle of ideas which we cannot stop. We can close the senses, but the brain will not cease, and it will give us new sensations. When all of the old had vanished, there was still this, the uncounted — the bang and crash and shattering boom of thought in the world's last age. All the psychologists we believed were wrong, and all the philosophers who aped them: ideas come first, stay last, and ideas give us our sense reports. That far, then, I was right; yet I am defeated after all.

I have new sensations for the old ones — the insect vitality (under my hand) of mathematics, the bitter alum taste of a spoiled faith, the rocket crash of heartbeats in young

children, the diagram of murder, the blue color of creation and the dun of extinction, the gunpowder smell of love.

Good-bye, good-bye . . .

Yet this is also wisdom. And oh, my unawakened darling (do you know how abstractly I say this, with what Godlike love?), where were you at the moment of the parental murder, on the stairs, when you were young? Where were you in that final competition when, fragment eliminating fragment, we were left with the hard glaze only? Where were all the others whose senses let them sleep? Did you hear the explosion that the world made, or see the spiral of smoke that rose and rose and shuddered outward at its expiring?





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